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THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE:

DISCOURSES UPON HOLY SCRIPTURE.



BY

JOSEPH PARKER, D.D.,

Minister of the City Temple, Holborn Viaduct, London;

AUTHOR OF "ECCE DEUS," "THE PARACLETE," "THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST," "SPRINGDALE ABBEY," "THE INNER LIFE OF CHRIST," "AD CLERUM," "THE ARK OF GOD," "APOSTOLIC LIFE," "TYNE CHYLDE," "WEAVER STEPHEN," "EVERY MORNING," ETC., ETC.

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THE SECOND BOOK OF CHRONICLES

(Continued).

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, our Father in heaven, thou knowest that our life is one daily need; thou dost give unto us one day, but we need more the next. Thou art always giving, thou dost live to give; God so loved the world that he gave—gave his only-begotten Son—gave all he had. May we come to the fountain that our thirst may be quenched, and may we come to the tree of life that we may eat fruit thereof, and never die. Keep us near thyself; Holy Spirit, remain with us; do not be impatient with our dulness and selfishness, but grant unto us long sojourn, until thou dost fill us with thy light and bless us with all needful grace. Thou hast done great things for us, whereof we are glad: once we were blind, now we see; we not only see, we are put in possession of a light that the apostle, chiefest of us all, called marvellous light. Once we were slaves, now we are free men, or we are in bondage to Christ, and in that bondage we find our liberty; if the Son shall make us free, we shall be free indeed. Grant unto thy ministers everywhere a sense of thy presence, a realisation of thy comfort, a preparedness to receive thine increasing gift of light; may they be true men and good, honourable and wise, faithful stewards, diligent servants, waiting for the coming of their Lord, knowing that he may come at any moment. This prayer we pray at the cross. There all prayer of the heart is answered. Amen.

2 Chronicles xxi.

1. Now [And] Jehoshaphat slept [lay down] with his fathers, and was buried with his fathers in the city of David. And Jehoram his son reigned [Jehoram's sole reign now began. He had previously been associated in the kingdom with his father] in his stead.

2. And he had brethren the sons of Jehoshaphat, Azariah, and Jehiel, and Zechariah, and Azariah, and Michael, and Shephatiah: all these were the sons of Jehoshaphat king of Israel.

3. And their father gave them great gifts of silver, and of gold, and of precious things [such as jewels, robes, and spices (Gen. xxiv. 53)], with fenced cities in Judah: but the kingdom gave he to Jehoram; because he

was the firstborn. [This was the rule (comp. Deut. xxi. 15–17). For exceptions, see 1 Chron. xxviii. 5; 2 Chron. xi. 22; xxxvi. 1.]

4. Now when Jehoram was risen up to the kingdom of his father [*lit.* "And Jehoram arose over the kingdom," etc., a peculiar expression only found here. It seems to mean, "established himself on the throne." See a similar phrase Exod. i. 8], he strengthened himself [secured his hold of power], and slew all his brethren with the sword [in order to prevent intrigues against himself. Such ruthless crimes have been customary at Oriental accessions, and are one of the natural results of polygamy: comp. the conduct of Abimelech (Judg. ix. 5) and of Athaliah (chap. xxii. 10). It was thus Jehoram "strengthened himself"], and divers also of the princes of Israel.

5. Jehoram was thirty and two years old when he began to reign, and he reigned eight years in Jerusalem.

6. And he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, like as did the house of Ahab: for he had the daughter of Ahab to wife: and he wrought that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord.

7. Howbeit the Lord would not destroy the house of David, because of the covenant that he had made with David, and as he promised to give a light to him and to his sons for ever.

JEHORAM.

"For he [Jehoram] had the daughter of Ahab to wife" (v. 6).

THIS is not given as a fact, but is stated as an explanation. Such an explanation fills the heart with shame. Here is a man who did wickedly in the sight of the Lord, and when we begin to ask why he deported himself so viciously, we are told that "he had the daughter of Ahab to wife." What can there be in such an explanation to bring upon the cheek the blush of shame, and fill the heart with the fire of horror and resentment? He had the daughter of a bad man as his companion. How can some men be good when they must needs drink daily of an evil fountain, and come into association day by day with a breath hot and malarious as a pestilence? This woman makes no great demonstration of herself; we cannot say that to-day or to-morrow she will figure in some great tragedy, and show how terrible a thing it is to be the slave of sin. She may have been a silent woman; she may never have spoken above a whisper; but her whole life was set in a wrong direction. Every comment she made was discouraging to goodness, every attitude she assumed was inconsistent with the posture of prayer. We are not special pleaders on behalf of Jehoram, but we are bound to recognise that which is set down as one

of the key-facts of his life. He was not bound to marry the daughter of Ahab; he selected her to be his life-companion. Men must reap the harvests which they themselves have sown. No man is at liberty to fall back upon secondary explanations, saying, Had I been better related, more comfortably situated; had my circumstances been more favourable,—all such reasoning is tainted with the vice of selfishness. First let us settle how far we ourselves are responsible for the circumstances. A man must not light a fire and then complain of the heat. No man is at liberty to drink poison and then say that he is in pain, and ask for the pity of those who are round about him. Cause and effect must go together: "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." On the other hand, we are to recognise facts as we find them. How can some women be good? for they have no joy at home; when they open the window, the sun seems to pass by on the other side without blessing it; when they speak a generous word, they meet with no response; when they propose to begin a larger and nobler life, their suggestions are received with resentment or disdain. So again we ask, How can some men be good? How can a man lay hold with sense of security upon an inclined plane, so steep that he can hardly hold his own for a moment? Why ask the man to come upward, to advance, when the very geometry of life seems to be set against him? Still, we go back to origins and say, Who began this? There must be no mere exchange of denunciation, but a common penitence, a common sorrow, a mutual amnesty, and a united recommencement. How musically these words might read! "For he had the daughter of Ahab to wife," need not have explained a vicious spirit, and an unpatriotic and unholy policy; such words would rhyme well with wisdom, progress, patriotism, philanthropy: "For he had the daughter of Ahab to wife," a woman who cheered him, understood him, supported him by her sympathy, and led the way to the brighter worlds which she wished him to claim and to enjoy. The words are right; it is the context that gives them blackness, and sting, and tincture of hell.

"The Lord smote him [Jehoram] in his bowels with an incurable disease" (v. 18).

But how can any disease be incurable, when there are studenst

of science and physicians of eminence, and men so full of knowledge of everything else that they have no knowledge of God? Do not understand that such men are empty tanks in which there is no water; but rather say they are overflowing reservoirs, and because they are overflowing with knowledge of continuity, and persistence, and phenomena, they have no room for God. How can there be any incurable disease whilst these men are living? Is disease curable up to a given point, and then does the physician retire from the fray, saying that he can do no more? How many are the resources of the Almighty? At how many points can he smite a man fatally? The house of the body is but a little house, and yet God can find ten thousand points at which he can overturn the health, strength, pith, ambition, purpose, and whole resolution of mind. A man may die by the feet, rotting at the extremities, and out of those putrid mouths the whole stream of life may run, as a coward runs by some back way. Or God can touch a man's brain, the pinnacle of the whole life, so that the man cannot find his own house, though he be within one inch of its threshold. God can so touch a man's eyes that the man shall not know his own child, but shall talk to that child as to a stranger, and ask foolish questions of his own son. How many are the chariots of God in which he goes forth to war? How many swords has the Almighty? Is not his name the Lord of hosts? and who can tell what the word "hosts" means in that connection? If God had but one way, if his were a monotonous providence, if death could only walk up one broad road visible to the naked eye, we might do a good deal towards foiling even him. No man can tell how death may come to him—at the head, the heart, the bowels, the bones, the feet, the mind: enough that God smote him. Does God sometimes smite without utterly overthrowing? This certainly is the most penal and disastrous part of his providence. Sudden death is nothing to lingering dissolution. How long will it take this disease to work its cruel way? The physician cannot tell, love can only speculate, grief can only cry in despairing prayer. We must accustom ourselves to this aspect of providence, or we shall play a fool's part in the reading of the literature of life. He is not a man, but an ostrich, who thrusts his head into the sand and says there is

no danger. Let us face the whole difficulty, and consider the whole problem of life. God has never dispensed with the element of fear in his administration of the affairs of the universe: let us take care lest we dispense with it only to lay up wrath against the day of wrath. All our cures are temporary at the best; we do but help men to live a few days longer. The cordon of doctors around the royal patient may help him for a few days or weeks: though the fee be an empire they cannot stave off the insidious, irresistible monster. There is a time when the physician gives up the patient to the mother. Can man be more humiliated than when with a whole panoply of diplomas he says to the mother or the nurse, "I can do no more"? Then why does he not tear off his diplomas and burn them? For they are mockeries, empty decorations, only certificates that legalise a fee. Who has not seen the physician turning away, giving up the battle, and handing the patient over to the doctor that never gives up, the mother? She does not give up when death has taken place; that is only another form of life: it may be superstitious, but it helps the good old soul to live better. There is a point at which science will leave a man. If Christianity does not stay with you then, you will be very lonely. But Christianity never goes away. That is the distinction of Jesus Christ. All other men retire, but Jesus Christ says, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee." It is a grand word, whether he were a carpenter's son, or the incarnate Logos. Whatever he was, whoever he was, when he said he would not leave the house till the trouble left it, he became God by that very word. Do not rest the deity of your Lord on some Greek preposition: rest it on his eternal pathos, his majestic humanity. It is a pitiable spectacle to see a man left at the very moment when he ought not to be left. How many came out of doors with us because the morning was so fine! That was their reason, they said so; they were sun-lured, the sky was so blue they could not stay inside, and they thought to get credit for bearing us companionship, while in reality they were going to enjoy themselves; the cloud came, the trouble of life came, and friend after friend fell off; the disease was seen to be incurable, and was given up with a sigh that had no heart in it. Who is that Figure still with the suffering one?

I beheld, and lo, it was one like unto the Son of man. Never did we go into a sick-house and hear the patient say, Jesus left me last night because he could do nothing more for me. It is at that point we know who is Saviour and who is pretender. If it be superstition, it warms the heart; if it be hallucination, it bridges the gulf; if it be a dream, it touches heaven. There is but one disease really incurable, and that is the disease of sin. No man can cure that. God cannot cure sin: "The wages of sin is death," and God cannot alter that law. He would cease to be God if he could conjure with morality. Then must man die under his weight of sin? Yes: but he may die in one of two ways; in a way that is hopeless, or in a way that prepares for the incoming of the Son of man with all the pathos, the majesty, and the glory of his cross. God does not cure sin, he destroys it: God cannot change the nature of sin, he can burn it. Only life can conquer death, only the vitalising touch can raise the devitalised soul of man. Here is a mystery, the sublimest of all mysteries—that death shall come by blood, that life shall come by death, and that death shall be so handled as to be the womb and fountain of immortality. With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. To understand this is beyond us; intellectually to master it and theorise it is not within our province; but to see it with the heart, to feel it in the soul and with the soul, and to receive it in the moment of agony and hunger, this is possible to all men, this is the gift of God. If we are waiting to understand the process of curing the incurable we shall never be healed; the soul must rise into the exercise of spiritual faith and trust, self-obliteration and self-detestation, and cast itself upon the living Christ. Are we prepared for this? Other salvation there is none; there is no name given under heaven among men whereby we can be saved but that of Jesus Christ. Great is the mystery of godliness: if it were a matter of speculation, intellectual exposition, and intellectual reception, then salvation would be of works and not of faith, for cleverness is but an attribute of intellectuality; there is no cleverness in faith, it is the climax and glorification of self-distrust.

16. Moreover the Lord stirred up against Jehoram the spirit of the Philistines, and of the Arabians, that were near the Ethiopians:

17. And they came up into Judah, and brake into [wasted] it, and carried away all the substance that was found in the king's house, and his sons also, and his wives; so that there was never a son left him, save Jehoahaz, the youngest of his sons.

18. And after all this the Lord smote him in his bowels with an incurable disease [a violent dysentery].

19. And it came to pass, that in process of time, after the end of two years [his sufferings continued to the last], his bowels fell out by reason of his sickness: so he died of sore diseases. And his people made no burning for him [because of their discontent with his evil reign] like the burning of his fathers.

20. Thirty and two years old was he when he began to reign, and he reigned in Jerusalem eight years, and departed without being desired [*i.e.* unregretted]. Howbeit they buried him in the city of David, but not in the sepulchres of the kings [another circumstance of dishonour].

No man wanted him to live one day longer; no heart said, It will be a dark day when the king dies. Is there infamy equal to such an issue? It is possible for us to live so that people will be glad when we die. They may be decent enough not to express their joy hilariously; indeed, a tear full of pensiveness may moisten the eye; but underneath all that is decent and courteous there will be a feeling of relief. We know what men feel who have been relieved of a burden which has been too heavy for them; we know what travellers feel when the darkness vanishes because the light has come. A man may so live in his own house that the house will be the happier for his absence. Sad that it should be so! Sad beyond all power of fancy to realise that a man's own children should attend their father's funeral with a joy befitting a festival. On the other hand, men may so live that many will die when they expire! they will say, "When such friends part, 'tis the survivor dies." Blessed is that sorrow, and right sweet, yea, sweet as the honey and the honeycomb! although it *is* sorrow, bitter at first tasting, but sweetening day by day, as distance mitigates immediate pain, and throws into perspective a beneficent life. When men of such character die, they change the whole outlook of those who live after them; they clothe the soul as with a vesture of pensiveness. That pensiveness is not real grief, unmitigated sorrow, despair, but quite a holy melancholy, the very ripeness of joy. But joy does not come to its autumnal bloom and flush of maturity at first; so to say, it is not born so; at the beginning it may be boisterous

elation, almost flippant, stronger in emotion than in reason, but when some great bereavement comes, when some tremendous stroke is delivered on the life, from that moment joy begins to consolidate, to ripen, to increase in all the richest elements of gladness, so much so, that many men not understanding human life think it sadness at the very moment when the joy is about to burst into singing and triumph. Fools do not know what joy is. Passing by those who are laughing loudly, they call such hilarious tempest gladness; whereas there is no gladness in it. Gladness does not come until the plough of sorrow has ripped the heart up, and made way for such processes and ministries as grow the true joy of harvest. How are we going to die? Like this man, who "departed without being desired"? We can live so that people will miss us, cry after us—"My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof!" Or we can so live that when we die the air will be lighter, and Sabbath will have come when our grave has been filled. Yet what a line of mercy is in this very declaration! The word "Howbeit" begins the concluding sentence in the verse. After "Howbeit" there may be some break in the cloud. Blessed be God for these words—adverbs, conjunctions, little auxiliary words—that seem to turn the current of the history as the helm turns the vessel. After this "Howbeit" what follows? "They buried him in the city of David." So he was not an exile altogether in his death. Other kings had been buried in unconsecrated ground. That ground is unconsecrated that never was moistened with human tear and that never will be visited with human solicitude; though all the priests in whitest linen and finest vesture have blessed the sod, it was damned by a diviner prelacy. Here is a man who is just within the line, just on the right side of the threshold, barely saved from being wrapped in the snow of eternal solitude. Then comes another word—decisive, disjunctive, but needful.

After "Howbeit" there comes a ray of light; after "but" there comes this significant clause—"not in the sepulchres of the kings." Justice will have some claim on which it will insist at the very last. We must not spoil all the music of the universe. There is a fitness of things in sepulture. The bad man must not lie in the good man's place. Character must be marked by the burial

of the flesh. To this end moral processes always come—namely, to separation, judgment, execration. How pitiful is the whole case! Unhappy at home, viciously married, living a life of wickedness, stricken in the bowels with an incurable disease, his bowels at the end of two years falling out by reason of his sickness; no burning made for him like the burning of his fathers, leaving the world without any soul's tender *au revoir;* we shall meet again on the other side of the stream: *adieu.* He departed without being desired, without any one saying, Let us save him another day, let us keep him over to-morrow. Yet, poor soul, he must be buried in the city of David,—so much is due to official position—"but not in the sepulchres of the kings": a king without kingliness; he has fouled his crown, he must not sleep with the brothers that should have owned him. Thus again the practical inquiry comes, and seizes us with solemn right, What is our end to be? Who will miss us when we die?

NOTE.

Jehoram I. was the eldest son and successor of Jehoshaphat, and fifth king of Judah. He unhappily married Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel; and her influence seems to have neutralised all the good he might have derived from the example of his father. One of the first acts of his reign was to put his brothers to death and seize the valuable appanages which their father had in his lifetime bestowed upon them. After this we are not surprised to find him giving way to the gross idolatries of that new and strange kind—the Phœnician—which had been brought into Israel by Jezebel, and into Judah by her daughter Athaliah. For these atrocities the Lord let forth his anger against Jehoram and his kingdom. The Edomites revolted, and, according to old prophecies (Gen. xxvii. 40), shook off the yoke of Judah. The Philistines on one side, and the Arabians and Cushites on the other, also grew bold against a king forsaken of God, and in repeated invasions spoiled the land of all its substance; they even ravaged the royal palaces, and took away the wives and children of the king, leaving him only one son, Ahaziah. Nor was this all; Jehoram was in his last days afflicted with a frightful disease in his bowels, which, from the terms employed in describing it, appears to have been malignant dysentery in its most shocking and tormenting form. After a disgraceful reign, and a most painful death, public opinion inflicted the posthumous dishonour of refusing him a place in the sepulchre of the kings. Jehoram was by far the most impious and cruel tyrant that had as yet occupied the throne of Judah, though he was rivalled or surpassed by some of his successors. (2 Kings viii. 16–24; 2 Chron. xxi.)

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, may we listen evermore for the voice divine, and heed no other. The sheep of Jesus know his voice, and a stranger will they not follow: may we be found in that obedient flock, following the Saviour everywhere, until we are safe enfolded on the mountains of heaven. Many voices assail our ears and seek to tempt our confidence by varied music; may we instantly detect all that is wrong, hollow, selfish, worldly, and turn with the longing of hunger and the desire of thirst to him who is the living One, and who alone has the bread of life. We know thy goodness, we have tasted thy mercy, we live in thy compassion, we owe our continued being to thy tears. Thou didst love the world, and save it by the shedding of blood; thou didst yearn over that which had gone astray, and thou didst send thy Son to find it and bring it home again, and because of his mighty, wondrous, all-sacrificial work we are found upon ground that is not forsaken of mercy. Continue thy blessing to us, then we shall never die; give us understanding of ourselves, give us the self-reverence which sees God in man, the image divine upon the image that is human and mortal; then shall we recognise in ourselves the temple of the Holy Ghost, and shall know that the Holy Ghost liveth in us, to enlighten, and rule, and sanctify. O thou all-claiming God, Father to whom all souls belong, give us confidence in thy nearness, thy goodness, thy pity, and thy love; and because we are assured of all these we shall be strong, and carry the battle to triumph. Ease our load a little, for the burden is heavy and the road is long. Help us through the night that is not shortened by sleep; may our meditation of thee then be sweet; then shall we think the morning too soon in coming. Thus be with us on the mountain-top and in the deep valley, in the hot summer and in the snowy winter, and bring us through all life's variety to the calm, the peace, the joy, the security of heaven. Amen.

2 Chronicles xxii.

1. And the inhabitants of Jerusalem [comp. chap. xxi. 11, 13] made Ahaziah his youngest son king in his stead: for the band of men that came with the Arabians to the camp had slain all the eldest [some of the mixed host that came and encamped against Jerusalem with the Arabs had slain all the captive princes, otherwise the people would probably have sought to ransom the eldest, and would then have made him king (compare chap. xxi. 17; Judg. viii. 18 *seq.*; 1 Sam. xv. 32)]. So Ahaziah the son of Jehoram king of Judah reigned.

2. Forty and two years [this number is impossible, since Ahaziah's father, Jehoram, was but forty when he died (chap. xxi. 5, 20). We

(*Speaker's Commentary*) must read 22 for 42, and thus bring the passage into agreement with 2 Kings viii. 26] old was Ahaziah when he began to reign, and he reigned one year in Jerusalem. His mother's name also was Athaliah, the daughter of Omri [*i.e.* the grand-daughter (comp. chap. xxi. 6).]

3. He also walked [like his father, *he, too,* walked in the way of the house of Ahab. There is a reference to chap. xxi. 6, 13] in the ways of the house of Ahab: for his mother was his counsellor to do wickedly.

4. Wherefore he did evil in the sight of the Lord like the house of Ahab: for they were his counsellors [the influence of his mother Athaliah and her brother, Jehoram of Israel, seems to be especially intended (see vv. 1, 3, 5)] after the death of his father to his destruction.

5. He walked also after [in] their counsel [he became a close partner in the politics of his ally, and joined in his expedition against the Syrians], and went with Jehoram the son of Ahab king of Israel to war against Hazael king of Syria at Ramoth-gilead: and the Syrians smote Joram.

6. And he returned to be healed in Jezreel because of the wounds which were given him at Ramah, when he fought with Hazael king of Syria. And Azariah the son of Jehoram king of Judah went down to see Jehoram the son of Ahab at Jezreel, because he was sick.

7. And the destruction [down-treading] of Ahaziah was of God [*lit.* And from God came the down-treading of Ahaziah, so that he went to Joram] by coming to Joram: for when he was come, he went out with Jehoram against [*rather,* unto] Jehu the son of Nimshi [*i.e.* grandson. Jehu was son of Jehoshaphat, son of Nimshi (2 Kings ix. 2)], whom the Lord had anointed [comp. 1 Kings xix. 16; 2 Kings ix. 1–10] to cut off the house of Ahab.

8. And it came to pass, that, when Jehu was executing judgment upon the house of Ahab [the Hebrew phrase strictly means "to plead with," or "argue a case with" (comp. 1 Sam. xii. 7)], and found the princes of Judah, and the sons of the brethren of Ahaziah [comp. 2 Kings x. 12–14, where the details are given], that ministered [were in attendance on] to Ahaziah, he slew them.

AHAZIAH AND ATHALIAH.

"For his mother was his counsellor to do wickedly" (v. 3).

WHAT heart can read these words without being sad with ineffable woe! Ahaziah reigned wickedly; forty and two years old was he when he began to reign; he had a brief reign in Jerusalem, only one year long;* "he also walked

* Ahaziah, son of Jehoram by Athaliah, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, and sixth king of Judah, called also Azariah, 2 Chron. xxii. 6: and Jehoahaz, 2 Chron. xxi. 17. He reigned but one year (B.C. 885), and that ill, suffering himself in all things to be guided by the wicked counsels of his idolatrous mother, Athaliah. He cultivated the connections which had unhappily

in the ways of the house of Ahab": why? "for his mother was his counsellor to do wickedly." There must be a mistranslation. All nature is offended by this tremendous affront. Can we not find some other word for "mother"? Any other word will do better; even "father" would not be so objectionable. The one word that cannot be tolerated here is the word that is found, namely, "mother"! We might close the Bible here, and say the book that contains this statement was never inspired. But we cannot do so. Then the word "counsellor" is so full of plan, premeditation, arrangement; the mother was a schoolmistress, with one pupil, and she suggested, invented, culminated ends, whispered, threw out hints, advised bad policies; told him when he was halting because the course was evil to "go on!" Napoleon said, "They that rock the cradle rule the world." To have a cradle rocked by such a mother as Athaliah surely were enough to be foredoomed to endless misery! How sweetly the narrative would have read had it proceeded on the lines of nature!—for his mother was his counsellor to do bravely. Surely the word "wickedly" is a misprint, traceable to some careless copyist! His mother was his counsellor to do wisely, patiently, hopefully,—these would have been womanly words, words most motherly, the very words with which we build home and church and heaven.

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grown up between the two dynasties, and which had now been cemented by marriage. Hence he joined his uncle Jehoram of Israel in an expedition against Hazael, king of Damascene-Syria, for the recovery of Ramoth-gilead; and afterwards paid him a visit while he lay wounded in his summer palace of Jezreel. The two kings rode out in their several chariots to meet Jehu; and when Jehoram was shot through the heart, Ahaziah attempted to escape, but was pursued, and being mortally wounded, had only strength to reach Megiddo, where he died. His body was conveyed by his servants in a chariot to Jerusalem for interment (2 Kings ix. 28). In 2 Chron. xxii. 7–9, the circumstances are somewhat differently stated; but the variation is not substantial, and requires no particular notice. It appears from that passage, however, that Jehu was right in considering Ahaziah as included in his commission to root out the house of Ahab. In 2 Kings viii. 26, Ahaziah is said to have been twenty-two years old when he began to reign; but in 2 Chron. xxii. 2, his age there is stated as forty-two; the former is undoubtedly correct, as the latter makes him older than his father. (Compare 2 Chron. xxi. 5, 20.)—KITTO's *Cyclopædia of Biblical Literature* (from which the notes in this volume are generally selected, except where otherwise attributed).

But the word is "wickedly," and we must regard it in its literal significance. What are mothers doing now? They could be God's foremost ministers. No man can pray like a woman; no man has the art of eloquence as a woman has it; no one can come into life so silently, quietly, blessingly as woman—mother, sister. If women would preach surely the world would listen. They ought to preach; they know the secret of love, they have the answer to the Cross, they can solve in some degree the enigma of sacrifice. This is the very reason of the horribleness of the text. If woman had been otherwise, then the word "wickedly" would not have read with such a sense of irony and moral collision as it does in this instance. It is because woman can be so heavenly that she can be so low, and wicked, and bad; it is because she can be so like a saviour that she can be such an engine and agent of ruin.

Athaliah must have her fate, and it shall be appropriate. The Bible does not shrink from stating the whole case in its reality.

"And all the people of the land rejoiced: and the city was quiet, after that they had slain Athaliah with the sword" (xxiii. 21).

Blessed be God for the sword when it is wielded by the hands of justice and virtue! People will not endure beyond a given point. Every queen is the subject of her own people. The nation may have a solitary monarch, but the monarch has a multitudinous sovereign. This woman ruled amongst the people viciously, selfishly, without regard to patriotic instinct or patriotic right; and, having filled the cup of her wickedness, the people arose, and Athaliah was slain with the sword;* and then all the people of the land rejoiced, and the city was quiet. This is hard reading! We must read it,

* In the seventh year (B.C. 878) of her blood-stained and evil reign, the sounds of unwonted commotion and exulting shouts within the temple courts drew her thither, where she beheld the young Joash standing as a crowned king by the pillar of inauguration, and acknowledged as sovereign by the acclamations of the assembled multitude. Her cries of "Treason!" failed to excite any movement in her favour, and Jehoiada, the high priest, who had organised this bold and successful attempt, without allowing time for pause, ordered the Levitical guards to remove her from the sacred precincts to instant death. (2 Kings xi.; 2 Chron. xxi. 6; xxii. 10-12; xxiii.)

because we wish to know the whole contents of the Bible: otherwise we would willingly have brought all these pages together, torn them out with a violent hand, and forgotten the story. But the Bible must be revered for its fearlessness, for a frankness that keeps back nothing; it is a book that is not afraid to show human nature to itself, and that so reveals human nature to itself as to prove that it comprehends it, and cannot be deceived by the most cunning attempt at deception. The land rejoiced when a woman was slain! What the land then must have endured whilst she lived and ruled! The joy after death is the measure of sorrow before it. "And the city was quiet" after a woman was slain! How much mischief can be wrought by one soul! "One sinner destroyeth much good." When the ruler goes wrong, the nation will either go wrong after him, or will stand up in self-defence; and under a consciousness of true dignity, and under a sense of what is due to God, will revenge the wrong, redeem and reclaim that which is past. Here again how beautifully might the text have read:—And all the people of the land rejoiced: and the city was quiet, because Athaliah was recovered, spared, continued in high office and influence. Is it possible that a time may come when people will rejoice that we are dead? Will some pulpits be more honoured by emptiness than by occupancy? Will some businesses have a chance to recover their character when the principals are dead, but not so long as those principals initiate and conduct the policy of the house? Is it possible that a throne may be a fountain of mischief? Questions such as these, penetrating, unsparing, we should thrust into ourselves, that they may work first painfully and then curatively.

Is there no explanation given of all this rejoicing over the death of Athaliah? The explanation is given in chapter xxiv. 7—"that wicked woman." This is an alliteration which the grammarian might detest, the rhetorician avoid as a vice in eloquence, but which the moralist must look at with a sense of ineffable shame. "Wicked woman"—it is impossible! It ought to be an affront to the very genius of creation; say dark sun, say waterless sea, say flowerless summer, and the irony might be tolerated, for it might be only a discord in words: but

"wicked woman" indicates a possibility that makes all hell easy of belief. This is the moral explanation of the physical disaster. Athaliah was slain with the sword—cry, Murder, then! Arrest the homicide, the regicide! But wait; you know not all; the explanatory word is found in the context—"that wicked woman."

Was there no brightness in all this history? There is indeed one quiet line. "But Jehoiada waxed old and was full of days when he died; an hundred and thirty years old was he when he died. And they buried him in the city of David"—we have already seen one king buried there—"among the kings." Thus he had a double blessing of sepulture. Was it because he was royal? No. Because he was mighty in war? No. Because he was sagacious in policy? No. Why, then, this double honour? Why this accumulating benediction? Hear the sweet words—"Because he had done good in Israel, both toward God and toward his house." Then lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and let the saint pass in! He seems to be a native of the skies.

"And he [Jehu] sought Ahaziah: and they caught him (for he was hid [now he was hiding] in Samaria), and brought him to Jehu: and when they had slain him, they buried him: Because, said they, he is the son of Jehoshaphat, who sought the Lord with all his heart. So the house of Ahaziah had no power to keep still the kingdom [*lit.* And the house of Ahaziah had none to retain strength for kingship (= capable of assuming sovereignty)]."

"And when they had slain him they buried him: because——." But for that "because" they would not have buried him, they would have left him to bleach in the sun, they would have left him to the mercy of birds of prey; they cared nothing whatever for the dead body; they could have trampled him under foot, they could have cut him limb from limb, and thrown his mutilated remains to the winds, they could have gone to the city for dogs to come and make a feast of Ahaziah's bones. But another thought came in. Oh these other thoughts, these collateral considerations, these lines that overlap one another and interlay so mysteriously! There is a field for the critic, the psychologist, the moral genius who wants to discover the centre

and motion of spiritual sovereignty. Why did they put themselves to the trouble of burying him? "Because," said they, "he is the son of Jehoshaphat, who sought the Lord with all his heart." So for the father's sake they paid respect to the dead carcase.

"Because." Who can tell to what he is indebted for his advantages? Who knows how the past helps the present? Who can altogether analyse and re-combine the chemistry of life? We may not exclude the action of sentiment from the processes of life. The world would be poorer could all its tears be forgotten; the flower looks the lovelier for the dew which besprinkles it. So with life; soldiers become greater men than ever when they begin to sigh because of some thought of other days and brighter times and cherished memories. Men can hardly prepare themselves against the invasion of that gracious assailant, Memory. How the old village starts up again, and the church spire, and the little schoolhouse, and home where childhood spent its sunny lot; and what monitions, and tender words, and sacred charges to be men in life's continual fray; and the book that was given, and the prayer that was offered, and the touch that amounted to lay ordination: how all these spectral lines combine, reappear, and re-combine, and shape themselves into church, and temple, and altar, and house, a singular form indicative of the mystery of life's processes. Think of a man owing a grave to his father's memory! Think of people putting themselves to the trouble of digging a grave in which to bury a hated corpse because the father was a religious man, "who sought the Lord with all his heart." Who knows what blessings he is receiving to-day because of something that happened half a century ago? Yet men say, What has the future done for us? The future is doing everything for us. Posterity is our unconscious benefactor. Or, What has the past done for us? It has made the present. The present is not an empty vessel, it is a full goblet: the past furnished your library, made your house possible, gave you peace, bought your liberty with the gold of blood, made it possible for you to sit still and sneer at heroic history. Who has not received attention in some form or other because of what the father was, or the mother? We have been invited to hospitality because our

father was kind to the poor; prodigals have been able to borrow money on the strength of what the father was in the town to which the intended victim belonged. Such is the action of life. What is the great lesson to us? It is to make friends of seven, yea, and to include an eighth in our benefactions, for we cannot tell what shall be on the earth. You are giving now your time, strength, money, influence to good causes: fifty years after some grandchild of yours may be blessed because of what you are doing this day. You take notice of some poor child in the day-school, you tell him that one day he will be a man, you give him some little coin, valueless to you, but the seed of a fortune to him; he will never forget the kind word, the generous act, the pleasant look, and mayhap when he has grown to be a giant he may help some descendant of yours across a thoroughfare, or through a forest, or over a difficult pass in life. Lay up for yourselves riches where moth and dust doth not corrupt, where thieves cannot break through and steal. Be good, generous, true, sympathetic, and your grandchildren may come in for your blessing. But if you are rough, cynical, heartless, a perfect genius in sneering criticism, God pity you and yours!

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, we cannot understand this life of ours: things are not what they seem to be: we cannot see enough of it to judge according to wise judgment. Yet we would live one day at a time; we would live by faith and not by sight; we would trust in the living God, who would have all men to be saved. Prevent us in thy great mercy from trying to know thee, and understand thee, and explain thee to ourselves or to others; it is enough to feel thee, to know thee in the heart, to know that our love is going out after thee in great pure flames of desire. Thus would we live the upward life, thus would we fix our eyes upon heaven, and evermore rise from earth and time and sense and all imprisonment into the glorious liberty of fellowship with God through our Lord Jesus Christ; then shall we know more of thy government by knowing less of its framework; we shall know that God is love: that what we know not now we shall know hereafter, that by-and-by all pain and discipline and sorrow and loss shall be made clear to us, and we shall say at the cross of Christ, The Lord hath ruled well his household, yea, the Lord hath done all things well, glory eternal be to his name. We thank thee for all love which men have towards one another, for all philanthropy and neighbourliness and charity; we bless thee for every solicitude that makes our heart ache with the beginning of truest joy; when we see the distress and wickedness and need of our fellow-men may we always consider our own condition wisely, and let the eagle that has built his nest in the highest rock remember how the wind can tear it, and the lightning can burn it: thus may we know that we have nothing that we have not received, and that whatever height is possible to us is as nothing compared with the infinite height of heaven. Keep us humble, true, sincere, lowly, sympathetic: thus may we live the Christ-life; thus may we represent the cross. Amen.

2 Chronicles xxiv.

1. Joash (2 Kings xii. 1) was seven years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years in Jerusalem. His mother's name also was Zibiah of Beer-sheba.

2. And Joash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest [Jehoiada lived after the accession of Joash 23 years (2 Kings xii. 6), probably 25 or 30. Thus the idolatries of Joash (*infra*, v. 18) were confined to the last 10 or 15 years.]

* * * *

15. But Jehoiada waxed old, and was full of days when he died; an

hundred and thirty years old was he when he died. [Most critics agree that these numbers are corrupt, and suggest instead 103, or 83.]

16. And they buried him in the city of David among the kings [an unparalleled honour: partly on account of his religious character, and partly on account of his connection with the royal family, through his wife (ch. xxii. 17)], because he had done good in Israel, both toward God and toward his [God's] house.

17. Now after the death of Jehoiada came the princes of Judah, and made obeisance [seeking by unusual humility to dispose the king favourably toward their request. It would seem that their petition was for a toleration of idolatry, not for a return to the condition of things which prevailed under Athaliah (see next verse)] to the king. Then the king hearkened unto them.

18. And they [*i.e.* the princes] left the house of the Lord God of their fathers [deserted the temple-worship], and served groves and idols: and wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this their trespass [for this trespass of the prince's, wrath came upon the whole nation (see vv. 23, 24)].

19. Yet he sent prophets to them, to bring them again unto the Lord; and they testified against them [solemnly besought them, exhorted them in the name of God (2 Kings xvii. 13)]: but they would not give ear.

20. And the Spirit of God came upon [*lit.* clothed, invested] Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada the priest, which stood above the people [an elevated place, probably the steps of the inner court, the better to gain attention], and said unto them, Thus saith God, Why transgress ye [Wherefore are ye transgressing?] the commandments of the Lord, that ye cannot prosper [*lit.* and will not prosper. Prosperity was attached to obedience by the law (Deut. xxviii. 1–14)]? because ye have forsaken the Lord, he hath also forsaken you [comp. chap. xv. 2].

21. And they conspired against him, and stoned him with stones at the commandment of the king [the weak king, though not an idolater himself, yielded to the persuasions of the idolatrous party, and allowed himself to be a mere tool in their hands] in the court of the house of the Lord.

22. Thus Joash the king remembered not the kindness which Jehoiada his father had done to him, but slew his son. And when he died, he said, The Lord look upon it, and require it [comp. Gen. ix. 5, xlii. 22; and contrast the words of St. Stephen (Acts vii. 60). Zechariah's prayer was prophetic. Within little more than a year he was avenged by the violent death of his chief oppressors (see vv. 23, 25), while the Jewish people which had participated in the crime continued to expiate their offence by suffering till the close of their existence as a nation (see Luke xi. 51).]

23. And it came to pass at the end of the year, that the host of Syria came up against him: and they came to Judah and Jerusalem, and destroyed all the princes of the people from among the people, and sent all the spoil of them unto the king of Damascus.

24. For the army of the Syrians came [*rather*, had come] with a small company of men, and the Lord [had] delivered a very great host into their hand, because they had forsaken the Lord God of their fathers. So they executed judgment against Joash [by defeating his army and slaying all the nobles].

25. And when they were departed from him (for they left him in great diseases [*rather*, in a sore disease]), his own servants conspired against him for the blood of the sons of Jehoiada the priest, and slew him on his bed [in the castle of Milo (2 Kings xii. 20), whither he had retired for some unknown reason], and he died: and they buried him in the city of David, but they buried him not in the sepulchres of the kings.

LESSONS FROM JOASH.

SEVEN or eight persons of the name of Joash are mentioned in the Old Testament. This particular man had a tragical history. When the wicked woman Athaliah murdered his father's family and usurped the throne, the infant Joash was secretly saved by his aunt Jehoshebah, who was married to the high priest Jehoiada. The child was brought up secretly in chambers connected with the temple, and in his eighth year he became the eighth king of Judah, and as such he reigned forty years. The life of Joash, though lived nearly three thousand years ago, is as fresh in its applications to human nature as if it had ended but yesterday. For example, Joash was everything that could be desired so long as he was under age and obedient to the counsel and discipline of Jehoiada the high priest. So long indeed as the high priest lived Joash was a type of filial excellence. Are there not amongst ourselves leaders who keep us right, Jehoiadas but for whom our religious life would expire? Our regularity at church may be due to them. Our abstinence from certain pernicious customs may be due to their influence. They are the stay of the house and the tenderest comfort of life. We do not know how much we owe to them. If their policy was one of driving instead of leading, we should know more about it; but because it is quiet, subtle, persuasive, and encouraging, it goes for less than it really is. Is it not the woman who keeps the house together? We are not vividly conscious of this fact during her lifetime, but after she is gone we observe a difference in the whole household economy: we cannot explain it; things are not as they used to be; there is more grating of the machinery; little things are felt to be absent; the fluency of the whole life is lost, so that now it goes in rushes and tumults, and is marked by irregularity and uncertainty. We begin to ask how this is; and in the putting of the question we are conducted to

the answer, for we remember that the woman, the wife, the mother, is dead, and her hand being withdrawn from the whole economy, the result is painfully manifest. We do not notice events that pass regularly, nor are we careful to ascertain their motive and duly appraise it: we soon fall into a state of acquiescence with everything that is comfortable; it is when the comfort ceases that we begin to put questions, and it is at that time that we begin to do justice to many whose influence we had ignored or under-estimated during the time of its activity. It would seem to be about the last thing men do, to estimate properly the value of subtle and silent influences, the magic and wizardry of noble character. We may even be ashamed to do certain things in the presence of the Jehoiadas of society. We are not ashamed of the things themselves, nor are we unprepared to make experiments in regard to them; but whenever we would put forth our hand to begin the experiments we see the observing Jehoiada, and withdraw from the pernicious attempt. So it is that there are trustees of commercial and social honour, men who would never do the dishonourable deed, speak the calumnious word, or mislead the sentiment of the market-place in times of strong temptation and peril. We rely upon them as disinfectants, keeping the commercial atmosphere pure, and discouraging in the most positive and decisive manner the spirit and action of men who are low-minded and selfish. These Jehoiadas deliver no lectures upon commercial morality, nor do they in any manner that can be charged with conceit display their own virtues; they simply go on their straightforward course, doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God, and the result of their presence and character is that even the worst men are restrained, weak men are confirmed in good resolutions, and men whose character needs inspiration receive it from their example. Are we to be told that such men are doing nothing in the world because they are not publishing books, delivering lectures, or taking some active part in public life? Such men are doing the real work of the world. Talk is nothing except as it leads to practice,—a lecture is but wasted breath unless it culminates in noble conduct: in the case of the Jehoiadas of society we have men who have left the elementary school, and are now themselves daily teachers of the highest

truths, and continual examples of their possible application to the real necessities of life.

In the next place, however, Joash represents those who develop unexpected corruption of character. As soon as the high priest died the princes of Judah came and made obeisance to Joash (v. 17). They were idolaters, they served groves and idols, and they succeeded in corrupting the king's mind and in leading him away from the true worship. This is the deadliest attack that can be made upon human character and influence; for once loosen the bonds of deeply religious faith, and all the rest is easy work. A man may over-get some attack that is made upon a political custom or a social usage, and he may even recover himself from the effect of straying into the enemy's camp for the purpose of momentary consultation; but when his religious faith is undermined his whole character goes down. The attack which was made upon the religious position of Joash was of the kind which is known as flattery. The princes of Judah said to him, in effect: You have been under the domination of Jehoiada, you have been merely a nominal king, you have been called a lord but have had no dominion: now the time has come when you should avow your great power, and grant to every man what is called religious liberty. Joash "hearkened unto them," and the result is given in verse eighteen—

"And they left the house of the Lord God of their fathers, and served groves and idols: and wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this their trespass."

Once lose reverence for the Bible, regard it as merely the first of literary compositions, or one of the oldest and noblest of poems; lose faith in the supernatural element which pervades it, let go some measure of the authority which it has exercised over thought and morals, and the victory of the enemy will be easy and complete. The same line of reasoning holds good with regard to the sanctuary. Surely it cannot be a fatal offence to neglect the assembling of ourselves together at least occasionally; surely it may be permitted to a man to regard other occasions of coming together as of at least equal importance with all gatherings in the church; it cannot surely be wrong to elevate certain kinds of intellectual inquiry into a species of worship on the

Lord's day;—all these thoughts are of the most insidious kind, full of temptation, and when they are perverted, it is in innumerable cases not the lower that is lifted up, but the higher that is degraded or impoverished. There is a sense, of course, in which too much religious liberty cannot be given, for it is the inalienable birthright of every man. Every man, however, should be careful how much religious liberty he allows himself to enjoy. That is the crucial point. Whilst we are talking about religious liberty in the abstract, there may be nothing of a disciplinary kind in our declamation; but when we come to say to ourselves what liberty we shall allow our own conscience, judgment, or imagination, we should be inexorable disciplinarians. Liberty lies so near to licence that unless the spiritual faculties be trained to all but supernatural discernment a fatal mistake may easily be made. A man's conception of worship really reaches his life. Let him lose his reverence for God, and his reverence for man, however much he may boast of it, will in that measure go down: the two commandments belong to one another, and are absolutely inseparable. Increase of true reverence towards God always means increase of real beneficence towards man, for there is a deep and mysterious sense, as well as a sense limited by the creation, that man is made in the image and likeness of God, so that when God is most feared, loved, and honoured, man is blessed by the increase of religious conviction and emotion.

Notwithstanding the defection of Joash, God sent prophets to the people, to bring them again to the Lord; and although the prophets testified against the people they would not give ear.

"The Spirit of God came upon Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest, which stood above the people, and said unto them, Thus saith God, Why transgress ye the commandments of the Lord, that ye cannot prosper? because ye have forsaken the Lord, he hath also forsaken you" (v. 20).

What became of Zechariah the son of Jehoiada? What becomes of every true patriot? What is the fate of every man who stands up in the face of a corrupt age and inveighs against its evil thought and practice? We are not now coming upon a momentary accident, we are coming upon a vital principle, when we read, "And they conspired against him, and stoned him with stones at the commandment of the king in the court of the house

of the Lord" (v. 21). Thus, though Joash owed so much to Jehoiada, he actually commanded that the son of Jehoiada should be stoned with stones. Then we read of him these bitter words —"Thus Joash the king remembered not the kindness which Jehoiada his father had done to him, but slew his son" (v. 22). This is comfirmation of what has already been said, that when religious faith goes down all sense of personal and social obligation goes down along with it. The man who could forget God could easily forget Jehoiada. See how irrational was the conduct of the king! He killed the prophet, as if *he* had actually originated the very evil which he denounced. But what does the killing of a prophet mean? Let us seek out the great and true meanings of actions, and not be content with superficial definitions. To kill a prophet means in reality to kill God, so far as that is possible. We know well that the prophet is only a representative; he is nothing of himself, but owes his whole power to his inspiration; it is therefore not against the inspired man that we rebel, but against the inspiring Spirit. We may try to elude this application of the truth, but when we hush ourselves into the most silent thoughtfulness, and betake ourselves to religious solitude, we know well in our conscience that our whole trouble is that God is looking, God is judging, God is appealing; and we seek to mitigate the pain of that fact by taking vengeance upon the preacher, the prophet, the man who reasons of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come.

Does Joash escape? Has he satisfied his vengeance and retired to peace, contentment, and security?

"And it came to pass at the end of the year, that the host of Syria came up against him: and they came to Judah and Jerusalem, and destroyed all the princes of the people from among the people, and sent all the spoil of them unto the king of Damascus" (v. 23).

There was an element of contempt in this invasion and conquest—"For the armies of the Syrians came with a small company of men, and the Lord delivered a very great host into their hand." A visitation of that kind would have great effect upon the minds of the men who were the subjects of it, for they estimated everything by great numbers and dazzling pomp: the fact that an innumerable host could be taken by a very small

band of men would be not the least punishment that could be inflicted upon Joash and his people. Joash was left in great diseases. His own servants conspired against him for the blood of the sons of Jehoiada the priest, and slew him on his bed. The young man who began so well was buried in the city of David, but "not in the sepulchres of the kings." In one sense the punishment was imperial, for it was inflicted by the Syrians; but the final punishment was degrading, for the man was slain by his own servants, so that his death was deprived of all heroic accessories; and in the last sense it was an official punishment, for Joash was excluded from the sepulchres of the kings. Every kind of punishment befools the bad man: the empire is against him, or, in other words, constituted society, as expressed in law, order, and adequate penalty; his own servants are against him, for they see that he has been living a hypocritical and worthless life, and that all his pretensions have but added to his iniquities; and all the honours of social ceremony are either denied to him or are bestowed with grudging and reproach. The wicked man is as a candle blown out. The memory of the wicked is doomed to rottenness. He boasts much; he pleases himself with the chink of his boundless wealth; he dazzles himself with all the pomp and circumstance of his residence and appointments: but all the while he is engaged in a fool's gallop towards a fool's fate. There are men who have their reward in this world, and even in this world it is difficult in many cases to regard their end as a reward. In many cases there is a suppressed judgment of condemnation in regard to bad men: nothing public is said, nothing audible indeed may be uttered, but there is a general consent amongst honest and worthy men that such persons are neither to be trusted nor to be had in grateful remembrance. They are dead whilst they live; their houses are but ornamented tombs, and all their boasting is but a swollen lie. God smites the bad man at every point. The wind of God's judgment comes from every quarter, and there is no escape from the fury of his tempest. The field and the barn, the herd and the stall, the tree and the wheat, health and reason, home and peace, all go down in the infinite shock of the divine fury. The successes of the wicked man are but so many failures. His very glory becomes his shame. The high tower which he has built becomes the gallows

on which he is hanged as a traitor against the heavens. Let no man think he can rob God, indulge vain thoughts, take vengeance into his own hands, live a selfish life, and then enter into honour, and pass upward into heaven. Let us be truthful to ourselves, and remember that God is not mocked, and that whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap, and that this is a law of manifest justice, and that any other law would throw creation into contradiction and utter confusion. Let those who begin life well take a lesson from the history of Joash. He began well. He "did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest"; and yet at the last, like many other kings, he turned out to be ungrateful, cruel, impious, and he died an ignominious death. "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." The very advantages with which we begin life may add to the ignominy and humiliation of its close, if we live unworthily of the privileges with which we were originally endowed. Thus let the old histories become to us as modern instances; for in this way only can we turn the word of God to the highest advantage, and show that we have perused its narratives, not as if they were measurable by the letter alone, but as if they were full of spirit and meaning intended to apply to all the ages of time.

PRAYER.

HEAR thou in heaven thy dwelling-place, and when thou hearest, Lord, forgive. Continue this miracle of forgiveness until the end of time, for there is no soul that sinneth not. Thou wilt not remove the cross until all its work is accomplished, and the soul of the sufferer is satisfied. We bless thee for that living cross; no more a symbol of degradation, but an altar, a way to heaven; yea, the one and only way, broad as human necessity, and welcome as the love of God. Thou wilt pardon us night by night: may we not therefore continue to sin that grace may abound, but because of the fulness of thy pardoning mercy may we be the more sensitive as to the dignity and holiness of thy law. How easily is thy law broken! We bless thee for this, because herein thou dost recognise the greatness of man, the solemnity of character, the gravity of every human action. To live is to be in danger. In what danger can the dead be? But to live to breathe, to hear and see: are not these narrow separations from loss and sorrow, and pain? Yet do we choose to live, if thou dost put the question to us. We would not die, but live: yea, though we be much afflicted, and know the necessity of hunger, and the burning of thirst, and the sadness of solitude, yet still we cling to life, because life has in it the spirit of hope, and to-morrow may be brighter than to-day, and the summer, like the Son of man, may come at such an hour as we think not of. For that summer we wait, for that warmth of heaven we pine; we are sure that it will come, and that even the sterility of our hearts shall be broken in upon, and the barren ground of our life shall bear flowers and fruits to God's approval. Teach us that this mystery of life has in it a deeper mystery still, that all this longing for life is but our poor way of longing for immortality. We cannot tell all the meaning of our longing; we know not to what issues our hope sends out its ray of light: but this we know, that there is more in life than we have yet dreamed, there is a mystery of joy which has not yet given up its secret: there is heaven coming to us day by day, always coming nearer, now and then flashing out some dazzling beam, now and again whispering to us as if a breath might blow the intervening veil away. Thus life has its gladness as well as its sorrow; thus walking with Christ our hearts are lifted up in gladness, as certainly as they are bowed down in woe; and if we see the cross we see beyond it the joy that is set before those who being crucified with Christ rise again with him in the triumph of his resurrection. We have been blind, else what we might have seen! We have let whole troops of angels go by without vision; yea, all thy heavens may have moved before us, but we have been so busy in the dust under

our feet that we have not seen the true glory; we have gazed at mimic royalties, we have looked out for passing pageants, we have been thrilled in the poverty of our feeling by sights that come and go like chased shadows; but the God, the angel, the spirit, the heaven, the eternal we have not seen, so our souls have been disquieted, and in our hearts there has been no sabbath. But we bless thee for the sense of loss; we might have endured loss and not have known it: by so much as thou dost make us conscious of loss thou art still working in us, thou hast not given us up, thou art still hoping that even we may be saved. Thou hast sent thy Book to come and speak to us night and day, in all changes of scene and clime and circumstance. Wondrous book! in it we hear in our own tongue in which we were born the wonderful works of God; and as we muse the fire burns, and our hearts are conscious of increase of vitality; when we look abroad we see the whole horizon white with radiant angels, and every cloud but conceals a door that opens into the eternal paradise. For all love, care, tenderness, what can we say? We are nursed in the arms of God, we are rested in the heart of Jesus; we are inspired by God the Holy Ghost, so that we know no more the emptiness of earth and the poverty of time, for our citizenship is in heaven, already do we walk the streets of gold. Out of the highest rapture may we come to do earth's plainest work, earth's hardest toil, with patient hearts and willing hands, knowing that death can be but for a moment, that all things are meant, in the sovereignty of God, to give themselves up to the rule of life. Thus may thy children be loyal citizens, patient workers, honest merchantmen, wise parents; going about all the business and solicitude of life with religious cheerfulness, with solemn joy. We pray for those who are in great distress; for those in peril on the sea; for those shut up in the prison of the pit, dark and helpless, and whose hearts are giving way with mortal fear; we pray for those who are in great alarm, who feel much, and cry poignantly, but can do nothing, men and women who are given to feel how small their strength, how brief the limit of their service. O thou who dost watch all worlds, and dost watch the least with tenderest care, look down upon all who are too sad to pray, too despairing to believe. Be with all men who trust thee; melt the mountains before their coming, and open the gates of difficulty ere they reach them, and give them to feel that the greatness of thy mercy is the proof of its divinity. Amen.

2 Chronicles xxv.

AMAZIAH.

THE most remarkable feature in the character of Amaziah is his half-heartedness. He was twenty-five years old when he began to reign; he reigned nine-and-twenty years, and was murdered at Lachish by conspirators. He was neither all bad nor all good. His day was made up of cloud and glory. He was neither wise nor foolish; yet he was both. He came as

near as any man in history ever came to be that mysterious fountain that can send forth both sweet water and bitter.

"And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, but not with a perfect heart" (v. 2).

That is the history of the Church in a sentence; that, too, is the history of many a man who sometimes wonders whether he will die, or live; whether he will fall over the abyss into the bottomless pit, or whether he will take wing and fly away to the gate of the morning. The Scriptures insist upon knowing and revealing the state of the heart. Everything depended upon that in the estimate of biblical judges; and everything depends upon that in the appraisement of God himself,—not what is the intellect, the head, the genius, the acquisition, the treasure held by the hand; but what is the supreme emotion, the uppermost wish, the dominating desire, the purpose that struggles through all things that embody the life. Our answer to that question settles everything. Could we have a perfect heart we should know the meaning of consecration. We are not consecrated until the heart is filled with divine fire, sanctified by divine ministry, permeated by the Holy Ghost. So we are called upon to grow, to advance, to become wiser, to add to our faith virtue, and to continue the mysterious addition until the pillar of a noble life is crowned with the capital of brotherly kindness and charity. What a marvellous thing is a double life! Men are not all insincere who are adjudged to be double-minded. There is a psychological mystery about this, as well as a spiritual enigma. Let us beware of rough-and-ready estimates of characters. Many a man wants to be good who cannot; that is to say, he cannot realise all his desire and purpose. No one can tell what he suffers; we see the things which he does, but we do not see the temptations which he has resisted; we see when he has gone one mile towards the wrong place, but if he had gone at the speed dictated by the satanic impulse which was focussed in terrific temptation, he would have been there, he would have been all the way, he would have been in the very centre of the flame. It is easy to judge men, saying how imperfect they are, how poor in knowledge, how feeble in character, how mixed in the quality of motive and purpose. Only God knows what some have to do

in order to go to church at all. It is almost like winning in a wrestle with death; it will be set down among the battles of the universe which have been crowned with victory. Blessed be God, man is not judge; the Father keeps the judgment in his own hand; and with what graciousness must his face be irradiated when he sees some men moving in the direction of the sanctuary, how reluctantly soever; and when they cross the threshold, who can tell the joy that is in heaven? Judging one another thus, if we judge at all, there will be found to be many better men in the world than we have often reckoned. The statistics are all wrong that are not founded upon charity, love, comprehensiveness of feeling, yea, that sacred enthusiasm which will not let any man be outside who can possibly be brought within. "In my Father's house are many mansions"—many compartments, many chambers, many provinces; they have not all the same aspect or the same garden-land, they do not all accommodate the same wealth of summer; still they are included within the golden circle, and men may grow out of them up into higher possessions—for heaven is but another name for progress.

Amaziah being thus double-minded felt the less difficulty in working out a certain law:—

"Now it came to pass, when the kingdom was established [*or*, the sovereignty (power) was confirmed] to him, that he slew his servants that had killed the king his father [After establishing his own government he punished the murderers of his father with death; but, according to the law in Deut. xxiv. 16, he did not slay their children also, as was commonly the custom in the East in ancient times, and may very frequently have been done in Israel as well.—KEIL]. But he slew not their children, but did as it is written in the law in the book of Moses, where the Lord commanded, saying, The fathers shall not die for the children, neither shall the children die for the fathers, but every man shall die for his own sin" (vv. 3, 4).

Here we find two opposing forces—revenge on the one side, and forbearance on the other. It is here that human criticism so often fails. It is hard not to deal one blow at the son as well as the father. It is almost impossible to distinguish between the one and the other. It requires divine faculty to discriminate, and to use a sword with fineness of justice. Who has not been offended with the son because of something the father has done? Who has not renounced the whole family because one member

of it has been found guilty of offence? God doth not thus judge us. He has one in a house, and two in a family, and three in a commonwealth; he will not confound the wise and the unwise, the good and the bad; as he hath himself two hands, so he will make two divisions—on the one side shall be the sheep, and on the other the goats, and he will prepare for the destiny of each. Our criticism is rough; we condemn whole nations. If we find that a man who has done something wrong belongs to a certain nationality, we simply send the whole nation down to the bottomless pit. Again, blessed be God, man is not the judge. He will, with fingers of justice that cannot mistake, take the sister from the side of the brother; two women shall be grinding, the one shall be taken, and the other left; yea, two shall be in one bed, and one shall be taken and the other left; it is in this discrimination, this individualisation of judgment, that God shows the fulness of his wisdom and the majesty of his sovereignty. Observe how all this is declared and established in the law of Moses, which is in very deed the law of God. The Lord has trained men by certain dispensations to the use of this very criticism which is so easily abused. "The fathers shall not die for the children, neither shall the children die for the fathers." When the Lord laid down that law he taxed human forbearance to the uttermost. It may not seem to be so in reality, but test the matter by human consciousness and by human action. Have we not wronged whole families? Have we not often thrown in the child as if he were part of the father, and let both be crushed by the mill of revenge? When a man is in hot blood it is difficult to stop with the death of the father: another life would gratify him; he is mad enough to slay a whole house now, and if he should strike the whole family with the sword he will explain himself by a reference to his ill-temper at the moment,—as if ill-temper could ever excuse or mitigate any offence! But it is just thus, by calling a sudden Halt! that God educates men to self-control, to nobleness of conduct, and trains them to distinguish between justice and injustice—justice precisely administered, and justice roughly dealt out. It is in the fineness of the discrimination that we reveal the extent of our spiritual education.

A most gracious word is the last in the fourth verse, "Every

man shall die for his own sin": literally, Every man shall die in his own sin. Where, then, the foolish law that says a man shall die because somebody has sinned; that is to say, shall die eternally, and never know the joy of forgiveness, because some man has somewhere at some time offended against God? One thing we cannot help: every man suffers when any one connected with him sins. No one can help the working of that law. It is a beneficent institution. From some points of view it seems to be severe, but the severity of one aspect is the beneficence of another. No man can do good and keep all the issue of it to himself. If sometimes we would slay the son because the father has been bad, at other times we welcome the son to hospitality because the father was a brave, chivalrous soul to us in the days of the wilderness and in the storms of the winter. For thy father's sake, we say, come in, and tarry long: would God he were with thee at this moment, for then the joy of thy presence would be doubled! The way of the Lord is equal. He has not a motion of one hand only. The Lord is, so to say, ambidextrous; if he deals severely he also will deal graciously:—"God is a consuming fire:" "God is love": who can connect those two sentences? Yet they are connected, and in their union they make up a complete revelation of the most high God. When it comes to a question of eternal destiny every man stands upon his own feet. "Every one of us shall give account of himself to God." No one is judged for another. Why, then, this repining, this impious criticism, about being damned because Adam sinned? "Every man shall die for his own sin." Yet there is the law, and we cannot explain it away, and the bedizening of our fancy comes off like an ill plaster ill laid on. The father cannot sin, and the son be unscathed. The curse that falls from the father's lips blights the little flower that blooms at his feet. We can only relieve ourselves in the presence of such mysteries by saying that the blessing which falls from the father's tongue settles like dew on the flower of his house; the child is blessed because of the father's goodness.

Again we see how double-minded was Amaziah by reading verses 5-10:—

5. Moreover Amaziah gathered Judah together, and made them captains over thousands [*rather*, arranged them by the houses of their fathers

under captains of thousands, and captains of hundreds], and captains over hundreds, according to the houses of their fathers, throughout all Judah and Benjamin; and he numbered them from twenty years old and above [compare Numb. i. 3; 1 Chron. xxvii. 23. Twenty was regarded as the military age], and found them three hundred thousand [Asa's army had been nearly twice as numerous (ch. xiv. 8). The great diminution of force must be ascribed to the Edomite, Arabian, Philistine, and Syrian wars (ch. xxi. 8-16; xxiv. 23-24), and in part to the general decadence of the kingdom, attributable mainly to moral causes] choice men, able to go forth to war, that could handle spear and shield.

6. He hired also an hundred thousand mighty men of valour out of Israel [from the northern kingdom] for an hundred talents of silver.

7. But there came a man of God to him, saying, O king, let not the army of Israel go with thee; for the Lord is not with Israel, to wit, with all the children of Ephraim.

8. But if thou wilt go [But go thou alone, act, be strong for the battle; God shall then not make thee to fail] do it, be strong for the battle: God shall make thee fall before the enemy: for God hath power to help, and to cast down.

9. And Amaziah said to the man of God, But what shall we do for the hundred talents which I have given to the army [troops] of Israel? And the man of God answered, The Lord is able to give thee much more than this.

10. Then Amaziah separated them, to wit, the army that was come to him out of Ephraim, to go home again: wherefore their anger was greatly kindled against Judah, and they returned home in great anger.

He was going to war, so he hired a hundred thousand mighty men of valour out of Israel for a hundred talents of silver—say, forty thousand pounds of our money. All his arrangements were made, but they were stopped—"There came a man of God to him, saying, O king, let not the army of Israel go with thee: for the Lord is not with Israel, to wit, with all the children of Ephraim. But if thou wilt go, do it, be strong for the battle: God shall make thee fall before the enemy."

The best critics say that a word has been omitted there, and that we should read—"God shall not make thee fall before the enemy." So the reading must be thus: If thou wilt go, do it, be strong for the battle: God hath power to help, and to cast down; he will be with thee in this, but he does not want thee to go; he will not leave thee defenceless, but he wishes thee to hold thine hand from this alliance and this battle. Or it may be read precisely as we find it in the text: If thou wilt go, do it, make thyself as strong as possible for the battle: but when thou

hast strengthened thyself at every point God shall touch thee, and thy knees shall melt, and the strength of thy muscles shall be as molten lead. But, said the king, what am I to do? I have invested a hundred talents: what about the money? I have committed myself, the money is already paid: what do you say to that? The man of God answered, The Lord is able to give thee much more than this: let the money go; better obey the divine law than follow the issue of money that was spent without calculation and without judgment. That is grand advice! It applies to every living man. Who does not say, But I have money in it; I have money risked upon it; if I could have the money returned I should willingly obey the law, but I have gone so far, and therefore I must go farther? Such is the foolish reasoning of men; yea, they have turned this reasoning into a proverb, and laughed over their own epigrammatic cleverness; they have said, "As well be hung for a sheep as a lamb;" "In for a penny in for a pound:" we have signed the document, we have deposited the money; how can we go back? This was precisely the position of Amaziah. How few people like to forfeit the deposit! Yet in saving the deposit they may lose the sum-total. The reasoning of the man of God turned into modern language would run thus:—Better suffer a little loss than the loss of everything; better endure the wrath of man than the wrath of God; the first loss may be the best loss; no man ever yet obeyed the right and did the good without God finding bread and water for him as long as bread and water were needed; and even if there were no promise of bread and water, do the right. The true gain is the gain of self-approval, not in any sense of vanity, but in the highest moral sense, gaining the glad conviction that all life has been guided by one light, inspired by one motive, and directed to one issue. What a part "the man of God" plays in all this tragedy of life! We meet him at unexpected corners. Why has the Lord instituted this ministry? How it troubles the conscience, how it interferes with the easy working of plans, how it causes disquiet and bubbling and foaming upon the fluency of an otherwise oily course! This man of God is always importing into human counsels great moral judgments, calling men to be measured by spiritual standards; he is a "theorist," an "enthusiast:" but for him we could enjoy the feast. Yet there he is—

hated. Still there is a fascination about him all but irresistible. We want to see him and to hear him, and we are not easy until we know his mind; but every word he says strikes us like a dagger. How comfortably society would proceed but for this rough, hairy, shaggy man, coming up from the wilderness, leaving his banquet there that he may trouble our feast here! He lives on locusts and wild honey, and he so digests them as to turn them into the strongest manhood that fears nothing and that would as soon snub a king as a peasant. We cannot all live on locusts and wild honey. The meat we eat turns to timidity: the meat he eats turns to lion. He says to kings, "You are wrong;" to the proud drunken ruler, "It is not lawful for thee to have her." The king says to him, "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" "Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" There is the man of God, sometimes mighty in prayer, sometimes mighty in judgment, sometimes ruthless in criticism, coming down upon compacts and treaties and alliances with a crushing and tremendous power that grinds everything to powder. We plead with him, and say, What about the hundred talents of silver? And he spurns forty thousand pounds as if they were forty thousand feathers. He has no money of his own; there is no bank in the wilderness; there is no stock-taking in the rocks. We cannot awe him by forty thousand times forty thousand, for he knows nothing about arithmetic. Yet there he is! Such are the miracles of God. What a comfortable house we could have but for the Bible! Even if we neglect it, it becomes a judgment. We cannot shut it respectfully; we cannot hide it, for it has a way of rubbing the dust off itself, and uttering mute claims. The bad man never opened the Bible at a pleasant place: whenever he opened the Bible he burnt his fingers, saying, "There is fire there!" There are moral influences in life, judgments, criticisms, standards; there are voices that are only whispers, but they are whispers that chill the marrow. Amaziah consented. It was to be as the man of God had said; and when he detached himself from the evil alliance he came from the slaughter of the Edomites, and "brought the gods of the children of Seir, and set them up to be his gods, and bowed down himself before them, and burned incense unto them." Here we have the double-minded man again. Yesterday he obeyed, and to-day he disobeyed; a week ago he listened to the voice from

heaven, and seven days after he brought a whole houseful of gods up from Pagandom, and bowed down himself before them, and burned incense unto them; and if they had been gods with the slightest grain of intelligence they would have laughed at the fool. Our life runs precisely upon these lines. It is not for us to sneer at the old king of Judah. On Sunday we sing hymns, and on Wednesday we cheat the unwary, and when they close the door of the place of business we smile at them; then on Thursday we sing another hymn. Human life is all double. We are body and soul; outside and inside; carcases that can be weighed and spirits that can fly.

"Wherefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against Amaziah, and he sent unto him a prophet, which said unto him, Why hast thou sought after the gods of the people, which could not deliver their own people out of thine hand?" (v. 15).

This is the ruthless mockery of righteousness. God always accuses the sinner of being foolish. Said he to Amaziah: "The gods you have stolen could not deliver their own people: what good can they be to you?" The sinner is a bad logician; the sinner is not only a criminal, he is a fool. How God crushes this poor king!—"Why hast thou sought after the gods of the people, which could not deliver their own people out of thine hand?" Sin will not bear cross-examination. The sinner makes a bad figure in the witness-box. We have only to listen to him, and we have no need of further evidence. Subpœna no witness, and ask for no other affidavit; let the man tell his own tale, and when he has done you will say that he has made out a case against himself to which there is no answer. Spirit of the living God, pity us! Who can stand in judgment? God be merciful unto me a sinner! Do not ask me any questions. Give me standing-room at the cross. If I may but touch the hem of the Sufferer's garment I shall be healed!

PRAYER.

THOU only, O blessed One, art the fountain of joy. Thou hast invited us to come to the fountain and be satisfied with the gladness of God. An open way hast thou provided, even Jesus Christ thy Son, who himself declares thy love and reveals the fulness of thy resources, and bids us welcome to the river of God, which is full of water. Thou canst make all men glad, if they will be made glad. But some are sullen, obstinate, self-willed, yea, the children thou hast nourished and brought up have rebelled against thee, and have fallen below the ass and the ox, which know their masters and do their will. Come to us still in tenderness and pity and love; cast us not away in thy wrath; for when thou dost cast men away, who can find them again? We cannot tell where thou dost cast the apostate—behind thy back: but who can measure the distance from the light? We mourn, we wonder, we pray that our souls may not come into that secret. We would stand before God's face and be blessed with the light of his benediction, inspired and comforted by all the tenderness of his heart. That we have such a desire is a proof that thou hast not forsaken us, for as thou dost make the field fruitful so dost thou make the human heart to respond to all thy goodness. Surely we should be blind if we denied the presence of thy care and love and activity in all the scheme of life which comes under our review? We ourselves are living monuments of thy goodness; thou hast put our bones together, and strung our sinews, and set our heart a-pulsing. Behold, we did not make ourselves. We are the work of thy hands, and not the work of our own invention. We can destroy, but we cannot create; we can take down the temple, but in three days we cannot build it again. We work under God: there is one builder: we are but fellow-labourers with God. Help us, therefore, to look to the Creator for redemption and sanctification, for the completion of his own work in brightness and beauty and glory. Thou wilt not leave the tower half-built; thou wilt not forsake the work of thine own hands; thou wilt not turn thy back upon us, and thus plunge us into infinite night. Our hope is in the living God; our sin shall not separate us for ever from our Father, for the blood of Jesus Christ thy Son cleanseth us from all sin. May we read thy Providence aright; may we know that thou art training us for some purpose; may we understand that when thou dost quicken our faculty it is for use; when thou dost enlarge our outlook it is that we may be inspired to do more work; when thou dost gladden us with peculiar vision it is that we may be assured that the tabernacle of God is with men upon the earth. Pity our poor little lives; they seem to be on the surface, so much so that a footstep could crush them. Pity our erring hearts; they find a kind of intermediate joy in serving the devil. We are fearfully and wonderfully made: we do not

drink the cup to the dregs, but we drink much of it, and it is in very deed sweet to our taste. God forbid that we should drink the death portion. Stand by us; give us a light above the brightness of the sun to shine upon the mystery of our life; and lead us, past every temptation, past the dwelling-place of the serpent, past the black river which we call death, and land us all in heaven. This prayer we say in the name of Jesus—name to sinners dear. Amen.

2 Chronicles xxvi.

1. Then all the people of Judah took Uzziah [this form of the name is found uniformly in Chronicles, with the single exception of 1 Chron. iii. 12, where Azariah occurs. Uzziah is likewise the only form used by the prophets (see Isaiah i. 1, vi. 1, vii. 1; Hosea i. 1; Amos i. 1)], who was sixteen years old, and made him king in the room of his father Amaziah.

2. He built Eloth [the Idumean port on the Red Sea], and restored it to Judah, after that the king slept with his fathers.

3. Sixteen years old was Uzziah when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty and two years in Jerusalem. His mother's name also was Jecoliah of Jerusalem.

4. And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father Amaziah did.

5. And he sought God [and he continued to seek God] in the days of Zechariah [an otherwise unknown prophet], who had understanding in the visions of God [*lit.* the skilled in seeing God—a surprising epithet, occurring nowhere else]: and as long as he sought [*lit.* in the days of his seeking] the Lord God made him to prosper.

6. And he went forth and warred against the Philistines, and brake down the wall of Gath, and the wall of Jabneh [probably the Jabneel of Josh. xv. 11, which was at the extreme border of Judah, to the north-west], and the wall of Ashdod, and built cities about Ashdod [the strongest of all the Philistine towns. It was originally assigned to Judah (Josh. xv. 47)], and among the Philistines.

7. And God helped him against the Philistines, and against the Arabians that dwelt in Gur-baal, and the Mehunims.

8. And the Ammonites gave gifts [*i.e.* "paid tribute:" comp. 1 Kings iv. 21, x. 25; 2 Chron. xvii. 11. A right of pasture in the Ammonite country seems implied in v. 10] to Uzziah: and his name spread abroad even to the entering in of Egypt; for he strengthened himself exceedingly.

9. Moreover Uzziah built towers in Jerusalem at the corner gate, and at the valley gate, and at the turning of the wall, and fortified [or repaired] them.

10. Also he built towers in the desert, and digged [*or*, cut out many cisterns] many wells: for he had much cattle, both in the low country, and in the plains [*rather*, "for he had much cattle there, and in the low country, and on the downs"]: husbandmen also, and vinedressers in the mountains, and in Carmel [*or*, the fruitful field, the glebe land (Isa. xxix. 17, xxxii. 15)]: for he loved husbandry [a lover of the land was he, *i.e.* of the soil: comp. the expression "man of the land," *i.e.* husbandman (Gen. ix. 20)].

11. Moreover Uzziah had an host of fighting men [*lit.* and Uzziah had a host making war (*or*, doing battle)] that went out to war by bands, according to the number of their account by the hand of Jeiel the scribe and Maaseiah the ruler, under the hand of Hananiah, one of the king's captains.

12. The whole number of the chief of the fathers of the mighty men of valour [an epithet applied to the patriarchal chiefs] were two thousand and six hundred.

13. And under their hand [*or*, "at their side," meaning, under their command] was an army [*Heb.* the power of an army], three hundred thousand and seven thousand and five hundred [this fairly agrees with the statement respecting the total of Amaziah's army (three hundred thousand) in chap. xxv. 5], that made war with mighty power, to help the king against the enemy.

14. And Uzziah prepared for them throughout all the host shields, and spears, and helmets, and habergeons [an old-English word, meaning armour for neck and breast], and bows, and slings [*Heb.* stones for slings] to cast stones.

15. And he made in Jerusalem engines [the first mention of artillery], invented by cunning men, to be on the towers ["towers" (Zeph. ii. 16)] and upon the bulwarks, to shoot arrows and great stones withal. And his name spread far abroad; for he was marvellously helped [*i.e.* by God, (comp. v. 7)] till he was strong.

16. But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction [*rather*, his heart was lifted up to do wickedly (comp. chap. xxvii. 2)]: for he transgressed [Uzziah must have deliberately determined to invade the priest's office, thus repeating the sin of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Numb. xvi. 1-35)] against the Lord his God, and went into the temple of the Lord to burn incense upon the altar of incense.

17. And Azariah the priest went in after him, and with him fourscore priests of the Lord, that were valiant men:

18. And they withstood Uzziah the king, and said unto him, It appertaineth not unto thee, Uzziah, to burn incense unto the Lord, but to the priests the sons of Aaron that are consecrated to burn incense: go out of the sanctuary; for thou hast trespassed; neither shall it be for thine honour from the Lord God.

19. Then Uzziah was wroth [*i.e.* foamed with anger], and had a censer in his hand to burn incense: and while he was wroth with the priests, the leprosy even rose up in his forehead [comp. the sudden seizure of Gehazi (2 Kings v. 27)] before the priests in the house of the Lord, from beside the incense altar.

20. And Azariah the chief priest, and all the priests, looked upon him, and, behold, he was leprous in his forehead, and they thrust him out from thence; yea, himself hasted also to go out, because the Lord had smitten him.

[*The Speaker's Commentary* remarks that death was denounced by the law against those who invaded the office of the priest (Numb. xviii. 7); and death had been the actual punishment of Korah and his company (*ibid.*,

xvi. 31-35). Uzziah, when he felt the hand of God laid upon him, feared, probably, lest from him too the extreme penalty should be enacted, and therefore hasted to quit the sacred building, where his bare presence was a capital crime.]

21. And Uzziah the king was a leper unto the day of his death, and dwelt in a several house [*rather*, in the hospital, or lazar-house], being a leper; for he was cut off [Psalm lxxxviii. 5; Isa. liii. 8] from the house of the Lord [this ground of Uzziah's dwelling in a sick house is added by the chronicler. Having been formerly excluded as a leper from the sacred precincts, he was obliged to isolate himself from society (comp. Lev. xiii. 46)], and Jotham his son was over the king's house, judging the people of the land.

22. Now the rest of the acts of Uzziah, first and last, did Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amos, write.

23. So Uzziah slept [2 Kings xv. 7] with his fathers, and they buried him with his fathers in the field of the burial [in the burial field or graveyard belonging to the kings, and near their sepulchres; but not in the royal tombs themselves, because a leper would have polluted them] which belonged to the kings; for they said, He is a leper: and Jotham his son reigned in his stead.

2 Chronicles xxvi.

DOUBLE-MINDED MEN.

WE have spoken of Amaziah as a double-minded or half-hearted man; and we find from this chapter that this double-minded man had a double-minded son. After the murder of Amaziah, "all the people of Judah took Uzziah, who was sixteen years old, and made him king in the room of his father Amaziah. Sixteen years old was Uzziah when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty and two years in Jerusalem." It is recorded of Uzziah that "he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord," but with this limitation—"according to all that his father Amaziah did." What that reservation amounts to we can never know. We are certain that Amaziah was at once wise and foolish; we have seen that he served the Lord, "but not with a perfect heart." He was always looking behind him, or looking out on one side, or reviving the memory of evil enjoyments, or wondering if he could not play the ambidexter and do a little with this world as well as with the world to come. His heart was not round, whole, complete, perfect; represented by a figure, there would be a good deal of brightness upon it, fine white light, but here and there would be

spots black enough sometimes to mar all the glory; then again we come upon great spaces full of light, and we say, After all, this man is superior; he presents a high average of character, good predominates over evil. Uzziah took after him—"he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father did." How can a son be better than his father? How can a son afford to rebuke his father by cultivating a superior virtue, by being strong where his father was weak, by being wise where his father was foolish, by amending the record, and thus subtly reproaching his forerunner? But sons must do this, if the world is to go on. Sons must even venture to be larger, truer, wiser, stronger men than their fathers. Nor are their fathers to blame if they occupy a secondary position in relation to their sons; it is right that they should do so; their sons outlive them, have the advantage of fuller light, larger civilisation, and revelations abounding in suggestion and in all the ministries that can ennoble the mind and helpfully and redeemingly affect the heart. Let no man, therefore, be afraid that he will out-distance his father; let him not die of this spurious modesty; let him thank God that his father brought him so far on the road, and then let him contribute his donation towards human progress and consolidation.

There was a good deal of night and day in the life of Uzziah.

"And he sought God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding in the visions of God" (v. 5).

Here we come once more upon that same good man who has just passed before us, and who is now silently, and now eloquently, affecting our lives. This man is not otherwise known of: but see what good he did; he influenced a king to the king's advantage. We know nothing as to whether he was rich or great; probably he was neither, in the social sense of the term; but he held the young king in check, he was schoolmaster and guide, philosopher and friend. How did he obtain this influence? The explanation is given in the words—"who had understanding in the visions of God." He was one of those peculiar minds that saw what to the natural sense is invisible. He felt things. He was not so much informed as inspired; he was *en rapport* with the spiritual universe; it

touched him, he replied; he put out his hand and touched it, and brought treasure back again. He had the introspective vision, and the vision prospective; his eyes looked all ways, and never looked without seeing, and every sight was a treasured blessing. We need more than animals to make a commonwealth worth preserving; we need more than bodies, and more than what is usually, but too narrowly, denominated practical substance: we need the religious element, the spiritual force, that marvellous telescopic faculty that looks away beyond the visible into that which is unseen. We need to have ghostly men among us; men who see the metaphysic in the literal; men who know that nothing is true that is not metaphysically true; men who insist that we see nothing with the naked eye, and that vision is a heart gift, an inward faculty, a sublime treasure entrusted to men of God. Thus the Church will always have an important part to play in the upbuilding of the state, in the government of kings, in the direction of great affairs. Zechariah will not perhaps be a man of wide fame; his father's name may have been forgotten, and his mother's name never known beyond the little house where the boy was brought up: but he will stand before men as a sign, he will have about him all the mystery and helpfulness of a symbol; men will not be able to say, "This is all," so long as Zechariah stands there, for he is the algebraic sign pointing to things unknown, far away, and yet to come. If we could abolish the prophets we should soon see our way to gallop to the grave; it would be all downhill; there would be no ditch, no hedge, no gate to leap; it would be a hurried race, and one desperate plunge, and all would be over, like a river that had been dried up. But these men—prophets of the Lord—who have understanding in the visions of God, who write apocalypses, who in the midst of common talk light a fire that springs to heaven,—men who turn prose into poetry, and who whilst talking with us in the speech of the day rise suddenly and royally into music—make us solemn by many a message not of earth. They are the light of the world, the salt of the earth, a city set on an hill which cannot be hid:—under Christ, they are the saviours of the world.

Then as to his occupation Uzziah was, altogether, a man of comprehensive mind :—

"Also he built towers in the desert, and digged many wells: for he had much cattle, both in the low country, and in the plains: husbandmen also, and vinedressers in the mountains, and in Carmel: for he loved husbandry. Moreover Uzziah had an host of fighting men, that went out to war by bands, according to the number of their account by the hand of Jeiel the scribe and Maaseiah the ruler, under the hand of Hananiah, one of the king's captains" (vv. 10, 11).

He loved husbandry, but he was obliged to fight. When he made great plans for battle, and accepted the inventions of clever men for the making of catapults for the discharge of arrows and great stones, he did what he was reluctant to do. Do not judge men too hastily. They sometimes get into positions for which they have no appetite; they do not want to be there, but a kind of temporary necessity seems laid upon them; all the while they are, in heart, otherwhere. Uzziah loved husbandry. There was a time in ancient history when kings cared more for ploughmen than for soldiers. Blessed is that country whose agricultural labourers are more in number than its military men. Better the smock frock than the red coat; better the brow bent in honest industry than all the decoration military. We must have husbandmen, and we scarcely value them aright. They are in the very highest of all professions; they seem to come immediately after the Creator. Other men are in the air, or on the horizon, or at a great distance somewhere, inventing polysyllables for the description of what they are about; but the husbandman is just next to the Creator. "The Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it." We cannot always follow the pursuit we love. The interruptions of life are many, sudden, and oftentimes tremendous. Is there anything more distressing than to be compelled to do the thing we have no heart for? Many a man in the city would leave his occupation to-morrow if he could find bread in the thing that he really loves. Every time he takes up his quill he feels that he has taken hold of a double-edged instrument; he would gladly lay it down, but the children would lack bread if he did not drive it all day, and get what pittance he can out of the waste of ink. And many men are in other positions that look lofty and that are amply

rewarded, for which they care nothing; they would rather be at home, attending to the garden, watching the bees, reading noble books; they would rather have what is called a nook and a book, a crust and an author, than all the noise and rattle and swell and empty pomp of nominal elevation. But we cannot do what we would like to do. Herein is part of our discipline, which is part of our education. We must have the will broken somewhere. Parents may be foolish enough not to break the will of their children, but they are only leaving other people to do what they have left undone. No man can reach the full stature of his manhood, and realise all that is sweetest in life, until his will has been cut right in two. Let those of us bless God who bore the yoke in our youth; then when age comes on it brings with it joys which we are prepared to receive.

Look at another aspect of his character—

"And his name spread far abroad; for he was marvellously helped, till he was strong. But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction" (vv. 15, 16).

Read, literally,—He was marvellously helped, and therefore he became strong. "Marvellously helped." Some men have never been helped at all. They have had to fight every lion and every bear without a friend being within a mile of them during the agony of the encounter. Yet every man is helped from above. Surely blessed are they who have had little human help, and who therefore have no thanks to give to anybody, except for keeping out of the way. Others have been helped until they have become perfect imbeciles; they have lived on the pockets of other people until they have forgotten how to make a shilling of their own; they have always brought an excellent appetite to the table of charity; they have been "marvellously helped," and the more you help them the more they will need the help. When a man has never been trained to make his money he takes it in handfuls from other people, and thinks they have done nothing but their duty. Some of us have had to count the shillings, and to learn arithmetic in order that we might know how to spend them so as to find twelve pence in each of them. "He was marvellously helped": let that be a reason for helping others. What we have

received we have received only to hand on, but to hand on tc honest and deserving men, not to vagabonds. Do not imagine that the Lord's river of goodness terminates in you; it is to be carried on that others may be refreshed and fertilised by the generous stream. Let us not be sour because we have not been helped ourselves; let us rather say that, having felt the pinch of poverty and the load of the burden, we will help others a little as we pass along the path of life. It may be only a smile that is required of us, or a cheering word, or a grip of the hand that means a blessing; it may be money, it may be time, it may be sympathy, it may be influence. Blessed is he when he comes to his last sleep of whom men shall say, He was a succourer of many, he marvellously helped all with whom he came in contact. How difficult it is to have prosperity and to use it aright! How haughty we become when we double our income! How insufferable we are when we have more than our neighbours! "When his heart was strong, he was lifted up to his destruction." Here we come again upon that awful instrument, "the heart." It will always have the next thing; much will have more; there is another round upon the ladder to be climbed; there is another field to be added to the estate. How difficult to say, Lord, this is enough; I thank thee for all thy love and care. Temptations come with advancement. A man is not the same in a large house that he was in a small one. He declares that he could never go back to the lodgings that he had as a young man; he wonders how he lived there. It is wonderful, but not in his sense of the surprise. It is difficult to be wealthy and to be humble; difficult to be abounding in all the elements which men count valuable and yet to continue attendance at the Sunday-school. There may be six rich Sunday-school teachers in Great Britain, but we do not know them all. If there is a rich Sunday-school teacher his name gets into the newspapers as a species of phenomenon. The Lord has an infinite number of poor helpers —in every sense of the term. Poverty likes Christ—he often has loaves and fishes to give away; and where that is not the motive he always has a smile, a brother's touch, a Saviour's look, a Redeemer's almightiness. So, for various reasons, for contrary and conflicting motives, we throng around him. He always gives—he gave himself.

A curious form the ambition or presumption of Uzziah took. He would be a priest; he would go in and do work in the temple; he would "burn incense upon the altar of incense."* It is not every man whose madness takes this turn. He would be not only State, but Church; not only king, but priest. He has now completely lost his balance; he is off his ground: something will occur presently to show him that he has committed the offence of trespass; he has broken through a hedge, and according to the divine word a serpent shall bite him.†

"And Azariah the priest went in after him, and with him fourscore priests of the Lord, that were valiant men: and they withstood Uzziah the king, and said unto him, It appertaineth not unto thee, Uzziah, to burn incense unto the Lord, but to the priests the sons of Aaron, that are consecrated to burn incense: go out of the sanctuary; for thou hast trespassed; neither shall it be for thine honour from the Lord God" (vv. 17, 18).

Kings must sometimes be taught their place. There have been strong men in history who have said to kings, Stand off! They have not been disloyal, but rather loyal, in the highest and largest sense of the term, because they have done this thing; they were men of moral discrimination; men of large ideas and true ideas of social righteousness, and therefore the Spirit of the

* On the golden altar, in the Holy Place; contrary to the law of Numb. xviii. 1–7. Elated by success (says Bishop ELLICOTT's *Commentary*), Uzziah appears to have desired to become supreme pontiff as well as king, and to exercise the same dual functions as the Egyptian Pharaohs were wont to do. Some have thought that he merely revived the precedent of David and Solomon; but it can hardly be proved that those monarchs, though represented as organising the priesthood and ritual, and conducting great religious festivals, ever actually performed the distinctive functions of priest. (Comp. the conduct of Saul, 1 Sam. xiii. 9, and its consequences.)

† Uzziah's punishment was the same as that which fell upon Miriam (Numb. xii. 10), and Gehazi (2 Kings v. 27). Thenius, while asserting the historical character of Uzziah's invasion of the sanctuary, declares that the chronicler has followed *traditional exegesis* in making the king's leprosy a judgment upon his offence. At all events, we may be sure that the chronicler has given the story as he found it in the history of Uzziah, to which he alludes in ver. 22. In Josephus the story is further embellished by the statements that the great earthquake mentioned in Amos i. 1 happened at the moment when Uzziah threatened the opposing priests, and that a ray of sunlight falling upon the king's face through the temple roof, which was cloven by the shock, produced the leprosy. (Comp. Amos iv. 11; Zech. xiv. 4, 5.)

living God enabled them to utter the word that was true. "Then Uzziah was wroth, and had a censer in his hand to burn incense," and he might have injured the priests bodily, but perhaps when he was lifting the censer that he might use it, at the very time there was the foam of madness upon his lip there was the foam of leprosy upon his brow—"the leprosy even rose up in his forehead before the priests in the house of the Lord, from beside the incense altar." There is a boundary: we may do this, but not that; we are hedged about by law. We have illustration enough of this in common life: why hesitate to believe concerning it in matters purely spiritual? We must abide within our limitation, if we would do our duty with success and with blessing. Everywhere if a man gets away from his appointed boundary he is smitten with some kind of leprosy; he is made to feel that he is upon the wrong ground. Suppose an unskilful man should adventure into the sanctuary of music, and imagine that he could approach the organ without his imposture being detected; his very first touch would betray him, and men would rise and say, in some form, "This is not thy place; thou art a trespasser; thou wast not anointed for this; thou art cruelly abusing the sacred instrument that was meant to discourse music for the praise of God." Let a man adventure into the practice of medicine who is unqualified, and by his bungling work he will soon reveal his nonqualification, and men will flee away from him as from a murderer. It is the same with the law. The great temptation of some natures is to try to do the very things for which they are least qualified. There is a marvellous irony in human genius in this matter. It would seem to be an inscrutable mystery that men will persist in attempting to do the thing which they cannot do, and which they were obviously never meant to do. Why this obstinacy? Why this mental blindness? Why this handling of things sacred with fingers profane? Why this contradictory life? We were not meant to be here, but to be there; and whenever a man is out of place he is guilty of wasting strength. A man can only work well within his own limit. No man should strain himself at his labour, be he poet, or musician, or divine, be he prophet or merchantman; he should keep easily within the circle which he was appointed to occupy, for all stretching is weakening, all effort that is above the line of nature

tends to destruction, both of the worker and of the influence which he ought to exert. Know your appointed place, and keep it. All trespass of this kind leads to the excitement of evil passions. Men do not like to be baulked; they cannot bear to be chafed by disappointment, and when they see other men succeeding in burning incense they wonder why they cannot burn incense quite as well: hence we have envy, jealousy, grudging, and all manner of ungenerous and ignoble feeling. And this is accompanied by a subtraction from legitimate influence. A man who might be quite a light in the village is lost in the metropolis. The only man who cannot see that is the man himself. He astounds the fireside of a villager, and therefore he thinks he can take the capital by storm. Many men are in the capital who wish they were in the provinces. Why fly to the capital? Why leave the humble sphere? The gate of the field was meant for some men to go in by, not to come out of. We might have been so much respected in the provinces; we might have been looked up to, consulted, and when we walked abroad the elders might have risen at our approach. But the capital is cruel, the capital is sometimes unjust; the capital is too large to be kind.

Here then we have double-minded men, father and son; here we have men adventuring beyond their proper limits, and being burned. Amaziah went too far and never came home again, for he was murdered at Lachish, as we have seen; Uzziah went into the temple to play the priest, and he came out a leper. Is there no providence in life? Is there not a divinity that shapes our ends? Is it not true that God's eyes go to and fro throughout the whole earth, and that he shows himself strong in behalf of those who put their trust in him? Are there not divisions and distributions of talents and gifts and capacities? Are we all made in one mould? Are we all of one size? Is there no scale of proportion? Is there no law of perspective? Is there not a foot as well as a hand? Is there not an eye as well as an ear? If a foot should say, "Because I am not the hand, therefore I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? If the ear should say, "Because I am not the eye, therefore I am not of the body," does saying so make it so? We are many members, and

yet all the members constitute one body. God has sacred places, God has allotted specific duties to men; every man will be wise in proportion as he sees his own calling, and makes his calling and election sure. Reward lies along that line, and peace, and rest, and comfort, and dawning heaven. Leave your native heath, take your life into your own hands, say you will create a sphere for yourself, and do as you please, and you shall be stung with disappointments as with a cloud of insects. Say you will insist upon having your own way in the world, and every rock you strike will but injure the hand that smites it. The gates will not yield to your touch, the rivers will not know the common wood with which you smite them in the hope of dividing the stream. But live and move and have your being in God. Say, Lord, not my will, but thine, be done; make me door-keeper, or lamp-lighter, or hewer of wood, or drawer of water, or a Zechariah, having learning in thy visions and power of reading all the apocalypse of thy providence: what thou wilt, as thou wilt, as long as thou wilt: thy will is heaven. It is towards this end that all Christian education must tend. This is the glory of Christ; this is the miracle of the Son of God. We have seen him pass up to it, we have seen him shrink from it, we have heard him pray against it, we have listened as he said, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me." Blessed be God for that prayer! It helps men to pray; it gives the charm of eloquence to the reluctance of prayer; it makes halting divine; it sanctifies imperfect wrestling, agonising supplication. Blessed Saviour, we have had to thank thee for everything. Now we have to thank thee for thy halting. Then thou wert indeed our brother; we knew thee at the point of stumbling. When thou didst say, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me," we said, Now how near he is to us; he is bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh; he is Emmanuel, God with us. Then he said, "Nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done." In that moment he conquered the cross. In that moment he was crowned.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, thou hast sent down from heaven a blessing to rest upon the men whose eyes are towards thee in the day of necessity, in the time of conviction for sin, in the hour of hope for the realisation of thy redeeming love. Thou hast not left the world without light, thou hast not omitted from thy speech the tenderest of all words, and all thy words to the children of men, welcoming them to thy gospel, are uttered in the tenderest tones. Thou dost reign over us, thou art careful about us with a great care; for we are formed in the image and likeness of God, and we are the work of his hands and the fruit of his thought. We bless thee for all this solicitude: may we know its full meaning, may we respond to its desire, may we be found at the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, without excuse or self-defence or plea of justification, confessing our sins, humbling ourselves before the living God, and asking for mercy because we are sinners. Thou hast sent thy Son to die for us: the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them: the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost: he shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied. This is our hope, as it is thy promise; this is our rest, because it is thy covenant. We wonder and are sore afraid when we behold the spread of darkness and the increase of corruption, but the mouth of the Lord hath spoken good things, and the earth shall yet be renewed in righteousness. Enable us to work in the spirit of this hope; then shall our hands be strong, and our knees shall not tremble, and our eyes shall look straight on, and we shall not be afraid, though many rise up in battle and controversy against the Lord. We bless thee for all good men; we thank thee for their influence, their inspiration, for the sacred contagion of their words and their works: increase their number, give solidity and continuance to their influence, and may the light be more than the darkness. Pity those who are ill at ease, to whom is given the sadness of an aching heart: lead the blind by a way that they know not: charm away the loneliness of those who are the victims of solitude: bring home all who have gone astray; may they ask for pardon at the cross, and find it there; may they own their sin, and thus become rid of it by the exercise of thy grace; and let thy kingdom come, God of all, and reign thou over us, thou wounded, atoning, triumphant Christ. Arrest every evil man in his bad ways; thwart his purposes, turn his counsel to confusion, and make him afraid by influences which he cannot calculate, that he may bethink himself, and wonder, and consider, and pray.

This we say at the altar of the cross, this we say with our eyes fixed on the great Sacrifice; and because we pray in the name of Jesus, we need not wait for the answer, for it is already given in thine own. Amen.

2 Chronicles xxvii., xxviii.

"Jotham was twenty and five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem" (xxvii. 1).

JOTHAM REGARDED AS A CONNECTING-LINK.

WHO was he? Whence did he spring? He comes so suddenly upon us: let us interrogate him. A few facts may lead to a great philosophy. Jotham was the son of a king, and the probable son of a high priest. Then he must be good! Let us take care how we hasten to conclusions. We may be right, or we may be wrong; but let us take great care of the basis on which our reasoning is founded. His father's name was Uzziah,—not a name to be altogether proud of, as we have seen. His mother was the daughter of Zadok, and Zadok was probably high priest. Jotham was a good king, almost whole-hearted in genuine piety, and a wise man in that he avoided at least one of his father's mistakes. Anybody can avoid a vulgarity; no genius is required in forbearing to imitate drunkenness, profanity, sheer and desperate recklessness: the thing that is difficult to avoid is a divergence from the path of virtue and wisdom. Heavenly wisdom discriminates between shades. A child might soon learn to distinguish between the right hand and the left; but all things are not diametrically separated; there are radii, and they can come quite closely together, being finely drawn, by specially prepared instruments. The wisdom that is from above hath a microscopic eye which can see the finest shades and the closest lights. Uzziah made a fool of himself in a way that his son could hardly imitate. Moreover his son may have heard of the penalty that fell upon the trespassing king. When a man's father has been blasted with leprosy, surely the son is not likely to go and do the very thing which brought upon his parent that malediction. We read, therefore, that Jotham "entered not into the temple of the Lord." Here is a negative virtue to begin with. The meaning is not that Jotham did not go to the temple service, did not heed the temple ritual, did not care for temple life; probably he was regular and punctual in his attendance at the temple within the assigned limits; but he did not enter the temple sacrilegiously as his father did, for, as

we have seen, his father went in and took the censer, and swung it, and burned incense, and the priests followed him with great haste, and arrested him, king though he was, and said—No: even a king must keep within the proper limitations; and whilst they remonstrated the white patch came up in the forehead, and Uzziah went out a leper, as he had come in a trespasser. Jotham took care not to imitate the broad vulgarity of his father's sacrilege. But to avoid a great sin does not involve the fact or the necessity that we must therefore be minutely, critically, and vitally pious. The Scripture comes into closer quarters with us, and asks many questions in a whisper which we could have borne if they had been hurled at us in thunder. It is the searching whisper, the spiritual cross-examination, the still small voice that wants the minutest secret from the heart, that we cannot endure.

The piety of Jotham was the more remarkable that he had nobody to sustain him: "The people did yet corruptly" (xxvii. 2). It is hard to be a flower in a wilderness of weeds. There is a singularity that is painful. It is hard to pray when everybody is cursing. It is easy to join the popular hymn, easy to flow with the stream. The difficulty is to be the one example, to stand by conviction in the time of general moral collapse; to be the one faithful among the many faithless. But there is danger even here. A man may think himself more pious than he really is because other people are so corrupt. A little light may seem to be quite a sun where the darkness is so great. The danger is that we take credit to ourselves for being very heavenly when we are only really good by contrast, when we owe more to the darkness that is around us than to the light that is in us for the display of any supposed virtue or excellence.

We have said that Jotham was almost whole-hearted: what flaw was there in the crystal? Read the words, and say if the most critical eye can detect in them any foreign material, any vitiating speck:—

"He built the high gate of the house of the Lord, and on the wall of Ophel he built much. Moreover he built cities in the mountains of Judah, and in the forests he built castles and towers" (xxvii. 3, 4).

Was there anything wrong in all that building? Surely no accusation can be urged against the man for building so much on the southern slope of the temple called Ophel; surely he was a wise king who sought to connect by a line of fortifications Mount Moriah and Mount Zion; surely he was a patriotic king who sought to defend the sacred height on the south and on the east, as his father Uzziah had sought to do in many a costly labour.

This wall looked towards the south: who does not like to work or build or loiter on the sunny side of the hill? Work then becomes a kind of pleasure, the sun blithely assists the labourer, and makes him forget quite half his toil. Many men are willing to assist on sunny days and at sunny places and under sunny circumstances, who are no use among shadows and gathering gloom and threatening thunder. They call themselves your friends, and so they tell wicked lies; they profess themselves to be willing to undertake any work that the sun shines on, and to do it in the spirit of sacrifice: no such action is possible; they do it that they may enjoy themselves, that they may receive the benediction of the sun. Perhaps they do not mean to be wicked: what man ever did, fully and self-consciously, intend to be as bad as he could be? But they are self-deceived, they are charmed and tempted because the work is on the southern slope, and there the sun seems to shine all day. If all this were said to an intelligent Christian congregation the assembly would listen with interest and attention; yet this is not the meaning of the text, and this has no connection whatsoever with the text. This is the difficulty which the Christian teacher must always contend with, namely, that nobody knows the Bible; and further that there is a great danger in neglecting the text that the sermon may be enjoyed. As well neglect to reap, and come for the fruit. What then does "Ophel" mean? It means the mount. Where was the mount? On the southern slope. Why did the king build so much on Ophel? Because it was most accessible to the enemy; he would have built as much on the northern or shady side if that had been the weak point of his life; like a wise commander he remembered that no man is stronger than his weakest point, and that no fortification is stronger than its

frailest part; so the king built much where the wall was weakest, or where the access of the enemy was most open; and in doing so he gathered up and represented the wisdom and experience of the ages, and anticipated what we and all the sons of time ought to do. Many men are building unnecessarily; they have not walked round the wall to see what place was weakest. So long as they are building they think they are industrious; it is industry thrown away. So many men are foolishly energetic and industrious. Why put more bolts on the door that is already ironed and strengthened in what appears to be every possible way? Why so diligently protect the front door, and leave the back door standing wide open? This is the folly of life, this is the madness of many business men, this is the secret of failure in a thousand directions,—industry to the point of exhaustion, early rising, late retiring, continual friction, but all at the wrong time or under the wrong circumstances, all stultified by want of proceeding from the right centre. What is your weakest point? Build much there. Your weakest point is not want of information; if your wisdom were half your knowledge a greater than Solomon would be here. Why all this acquisition of more languages, more history, more philosophy? Your character is running out of you at another point. Build much where much building is needed. Your want is not want of more money. Suppose your money were multiplied by ten, what of it? It would be multiplied by ten if you thought it were. After a certain point, a man can have just as much as he pleases to have by multiplying it a hundredfold. There is a time when money ceases to be of value as to living effect and blessed influence; therefore you can at any time multiply what you have by any number of units and ciphers, and all will come out in the great polysyllable of love. You do not need more money, but you need more character, patience, thoughtfulness, self-control, settled persistence, unsparing discipline: why not build much at Ophel? What is your weakest point—passion? Have plenty of water at hand, mountains of ice; that will be wisdom; but to be giving great festivals and floating banners and sounding trumpets will be absolutely useless to you: what you want is a plunge into an ice-pit, and to stop there till your friends fetch you out of it,—you will be a long time absent. What is your weakest point—covetousness? Then

take inkhorn and pen and cleanest sheet of whitest paper, and write on it in God's sight that every day in the week you will give a sum that will pinch you. You do not give till you begin to feel you have given. All other contribution is luxury, vanity, a perfunctory service; let there be some feeling of real sacrifice; then every day for a time will be a battle. There will stand the oath—a challenge, a claim. Near your shoulder there will plead an invisible devil, who will say, Has not the time come when you might relax your discipline? And you, poor bruised reed, only healed the day before yesterday, will begin to feel that perhaps you might intermit a day. Build much on that Ophel; that is your salvation or your ruin, namely, your relation to that weakest point in your character. What is your most accessible point—indolence? Build much there; insist upon being roused; say to your soul, It is right that I should, if need be, be maddened into action; and plead with your dearest friend not to spare the puncture that will call you to your fate. Sloth steals over a man, lulls him, delights him; and how quickly the unsympathetic clock goes when we are dozing! What man ever woke up and said, It is not so far on as I thought it was? How many thousands awake to say they had no idea that the time had passed so rapidly? Is your weakest point envy? Is it impossible for you to see your neighbour prosper without your sleep being broken in upon? Does the prosperity of your competitor spoil your peace? That is your Ophel; build much there; to build otherwhere is useless; such building may express industry, but industry misspent; to beat the air is a fool's exercise.

You are not going to found an accusation on the process and action of building. He was not building evil temples, unholy houses, places destitute of every sign of spiritual excellence and religious significance. Yet it was in all that building that he got wrong. We must go to the religious critic to find what men are doing. We must go to the pulpit, if the pulpit is true, to know whether kings are acting wisely or unwisely; and the pulpit must bear the foolish accusation of being political in its criticism and censure. All the building is proceeding, and people are saying what an admirable building it is; but Hosea was the prophet of the time, a burning fire in the northern kingdom, a man who

would be written down by the journalists of the day for being political; he thundered in his age, and made kings know that prophecy was the true royalty. Said he, in the name of God: "Israel hath forgotten his Maker, and buildeth temples; and Judah hath multiplied fenced cities: but I will send a fire upon his cities, and it shall devour the palaces thereof." Whilst Jotham was building Hosea was thundering. Hosea might have been more popular if he had said nothing about it. People love an inoffensive ministry; a sweet, quiet, vapid platitudinarianism. But the prophets were great critics; they let nothing escape them, they condemned with a strong voice. Said Isaiah, that great statesman-prophet—who would not be shut up within some limited place called a pulpit, but who made creation the theatre of his action, "The fortress also shall cease from Ephraim,"—the northern tribes being politically designated by that name, and being thus significantly described. Jotham would have fortresses and castles and towers and much masonry. The Lord has always been training the race to spiritual dependence. If he has allowed man to build anything with mortar and stone, it has been to teach him the inutility of any such erections. "I will send a fire upon his cities, and it shall devour the palaces thereof." The word "castles" in this verse literally means palaces, the very word which Hosea uttered at the bidding of God. The Lord is to be our refuge and strength, not our high walls and great towers and invincible bastions. The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge. A man may be building atheistically. A man may lay up so much for a rainy day that in his very economy and penuriousness and forethought he may be denying God. Innocent indeed Jotham appeared to be when building and completing the line of fortifications; but he ought to have trusted more in the living God. There be those who say that heaven helps those who help themselves, and they help themselves so much as to leave heaven nothing to do. Are we not displacing faith by prudence? Are we not ousting religion by calculation? Except the Lord keep the city, every gate of it will fall down, and the burglars may enter in full force. Except the Lord watch, the watchman's lamp and rattle are but child's toys. What is the fortification of our life? What is the line of defence? Wherein have we put our trust? What appears to be innocent may in

reality be full of atheism and folly.' Self-preservation may be really an aspect of atheism. To put another line of defence around one's life may be to restrain prayer before God. Thus all through the ages God has been training men to spiritual trust, to simple faith, to casting one's self upon the Almighty, and saying—Father, as thou wilt; I am not my own, I am thine: lead me, guide me, make use of me, make my whole life a blessing; I want to have no will but thine: there cannot be two almighties: the Lord reigneth; he shall be the defence of my soul.

Was Jotham, then, condemned and utterly cast away? No. We will retain our first form of words and say he was almost whole-hearted in his healthy piety. And it is recorded of him, "Jotham became mighty, because he prepared his ways before the Lord his God" (xxvii. 6). Literally, He directed his steps by the meridian of God's righteousness. "In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." How difficult it is to be a whole-hearted man in piety! How strong the temptation just to do a little building and a little praying! How likely the Sunday of life is to be voted out by the six competing days! It must be hard to be the one day in the week which peculiarly bears the image and superscription of God. It is difficult to tell the whole truth. Who does? Society would be rent in pieces if the whole truth were spoken one single day. Jotham established his ways before God; he lived a religious life; he had an uppermost thought that fixed itself upon the living God. Who is a Christian? No man. It is impossible to be a Christian. What is possible is the desire—"I count not myself to have attained, but I press toward the mark." If that was all the great apostle accounted himself to have done, in some feeble echo only can we claim to be of the glorious company of the apostles. The Lord looks upon the uppermost thought, the supreme desire, and when we can say, "Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee: I know what happened four days ago—I know it—yet I love thee," then shall come a mission to feed the lambs and sheep.

Such was Jotham, in rude outline. Such a father must, we should say, have an excellent son. On so fair a tree fair fruit

must be found. Yet we must beware of our own reasoning, for such halting logic would not have given us Jotham himself. We are on the wrong line of reasoning if we suppose that a good father must have a good son. There is a kind of natural logic in it, a sequence that comes as if it were of necessity; but it is not so. Jotham's father was a leper, and was smitten with leprosy on moral grounds. Helped until he became strong, he was not satisfied with strength; he exaggerated his strength into presumption; he inspired his strength by a baleful ambition, and he was ruined in his very endeavour to become more than God intended him to be. Blessed is he who knows the measure of his election, and who makes his calling and election sure; blessed is he who knows he cannot preach, cannot utter music, cannot grasp and handle with mastery the tragedy of life; blessed is he who knows just what he can do, and who faithfully, simply, lovingly does it; he shall be honoured with many honours when his Lord cometh. Uzziah was not after that model. Having done much he thought he could do more, and in the perversion and misapplication of his strength he found his leprosy. It would seem as if Providence persistently broke in upon natural logic and asserted a sovereignty immeasurable, incalculable, so that no man could tell what will happen to-morrow. The growth of humanity is not after a horticultural manner. We cannot say that a good tree shall have good off-shoots, if we are speaking of humanity. The holiest father may have a murderer for his son. The sweetest mother may die of a broken heart. Only a foolish criticism is reckless in fixing definite responsibilities in this matter of the nurture and culture of children. The Lord rebukes us when we say that because the father was good the son must be good; or because the father was evil the son must be evil. The Lord permits men to come in between who are bad, or who are good, that all our little speculation about heredity, and all our arrangements for moral progress, may be thrown back and lost in confusion. Herein is the working of that mysterious law which is often misunderstood when denominated the law of election. We cannot tell what God is doing. Your son ought to have been good: for where is there a braver soul than yourself? The boy ought to have been chivalrous, for he never knew you do a mean deed or give lodgment to an ungenerous thought. In a way too

he was proud of his father; yet there was no devil's work he would not stoop to do. He did not get the bad blood from his mother, for gentler, sweeter soul never sang God's psalms in God's house. Yet there is the mystery, and it is not for a reckless criticism to define the origin and the issue of this mysterious phenomenon in human development.

Jotham had a son called Ahaz:* "But he did not that which was right in the sight of the Lord, like David his father" (xxviii. 1). What a point of departure! The prodigal son has been in every history; it required but the fingers of Christ to take him out and set him forth in a parable that fills the eyes like the sun at mid-day. Why did Ahaz go astray when his father was a good man? Perhaps he went only a little astray; perhaps the deflection was hardly calculable. No, that is not so:—"For he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel, and made also molten images for Baalim,"—not for *Baal;* he served all the gods; his idols were in the plural number: for every aspect of Baal; literally, for the Baals. There was not an avatar that had not its recognition from wicked Ahaz. He walked round the Baalim to see how many there were of them, and the more there were the better he was pleased. "Moreover he

* Ahaz, the eleventh king of Judah, and son of Jotham, ascended the throne in the twentieth year of his age, according to 2 Kings xvi. 2. But this must be a transcriber's error for the twenty-fifth, for otherwise his son Hezekiah was born when he was eleven years old. At the time of his accession, Rezin king of Damascus and Pekah king of Israel had recently formed a league against Judah, and they proceeded to lay siege to Jerusalem, intending to place on the throne Ben Tabeal, who was not a prince of the royal family of Judah, but probably a Syrian noble. Upon this the great prophet Isaiah, full of zeal for God and patriotic loyalty to the house of David, hastened to give advice and encouragement to Ahaz, and it was probably owing to the spirit of energy and religious devotion which he poured into his counsels, that the allies failed in their attack on Jerusalem. Thus much, together with anticipations of danger from the Assyrians, and a general picture of weakness and unfaithfulness both in the king and the people, we find in the famous prophecies of the 7th, 8th, and 9th chapters of Isaiah, in which he seeks to animate and support them by the promise of the Messiah. From 2 Kings xvi. and 2 Chron. xxviii. we learn that the allies took a vast number of captives, who, however, were restored in virtue of the remonstrances of the prophet Oded; and that they also inflicted a most severe injury on Judah by the capture of Elath, a flourishing port on the Red

burnt incense in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and burnt his children in the fire, after the abominations of the heathen whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel" (xxviii. 3). He revelled in wickedness; he was a glutton at the devil's table. He would have come well immediately after his grandfather, the leper. But Jotham was between. That is the mystery. How is it that man goes on for a while, and then suddenly reverts, or turns aside, or makes room for a monster? It is a curious history! There was no end to the wickedness of Ahaz. "He made Judah naked, and transgressed sore against the Lord": literally, He made Judah licentious; still more literally, He loosed Judah, took away the restraints of decency, custom, publicity; cut the tether, loosed Judah, made Judah naked, destroyed the last light of decency. Yet Jotham was his father. That is the difficulty. The old leprosy was to come up again in another form. This is the son of the leper, only the leprosy is on the heart, not on the face. A melancholy record, truly! Yet Jotham was his father. His father prayed, he worshipped idols; his father acknowledged God, he denied him. All the home influence was lost; he was a sevenfold offender. Hear his record:—he worshipped the gods of Syria, "For he sacrificed unto the gods of Damascus, which smote him: and he said,

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Sea, in which, after expelling the Jews, they re-established the Edomites (according to the true reading of 2 Kings xvi. 6), who attacked and wasted the eastern part of Judah, while the Philistines invaded the west and south. The weak-minded and helpless Ahaz sought deliverance from these numerous troubles by appealing to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, who freed him from his most formidable enemies by invading Syria, taking Damascus, killing Rezin, and depriving Israel of its northern and trans-Jordanic districts. But Ahaz had to purchase this help at a costly price: he became tributary to Tiglath-pileser, sent him all the treasures of the Temple and his own palace, and even appeared before him in Damascus as a vassal. He also ventured to seek for safety in heathen ceremonies; making his son pass through the fire to Moloch, consulting wizards and necromancers (Isaiah viii. 19), sacrificing to the Syrian gods, introducing a foreign altar from Damascus, and probably the worship of the heavenly bodies from Assyria and Babylon, as he would seem to have set up the horses of the sun mentioned in 2 Kings xxiii. 11; and "the altars on the top (or roof) of the upper chamber of Ahaz" (2 Kings xxiii. 12) were connected with the adoration of the stars. We see another and blameless result of this intercourse with an astronomical people in the "sundial of Ahaz" (Isaiah xxxviii. 8). He died after a reign of sixteen years, lasting B.C. 740-724.—SMITH'S *Dictionary of the Bible.*

Because the gods of the kings of Syria help them, therefore will I sacrifice to them, that they may help me. But"—now comes a sentence that ought to be written in letters of fire, that ought to be kept steadily before the eyes of every young man—

"But they were the ruin of him" (xxviii. 23).

He credited them with helping the kings of Syria; he thought, therefore, they would help him, if he patted them, caressed them, sealed their lips with a kiss of homage. But you cannot adopt idolatries. When will men learn that lesson? It is one thing to have been born in an idolatry, to have known nothing before it, to have come along the idolatrous line, and to have walked according to the present light. We do not say that a man may not get good from idolatry, if he has known nothing better. We cannot enter into that mystery; we cannot tell what wonders are wrought in the heart by the simple exercise of faith, though the object of faith be wood or stone, rising sun or waving forest. The assumption is that nothing better was known. It is another thing to go back from the light into the darkness, to go from civilisation to barbarism. Men cannot do that even in other levels and circles of life. Who can go back to the town of his nativity, which he once thought so large and noble, without seeing how shrunken it is and how poor a place to have been born in? Who would go back to his early ignorance and call it knowledge? Rather every man who grows, says, "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away"—as no longer fitting me or becoming me—"childish things." Men are going back to-day to idolatries, speculations, conjectures, and are trying to eke out and patch up a religion of their own; but it never stands any man in good stead; it breaks down in the darkness, it will not go through the valley of the shadow of death. Eclectic philosophers took a little from this system, and a little from that, and a little from half a dozen more, and compounded a mixture of their own. That is what we are trying to do now. See what a patched coat is the Church's theology to-day! A little orthodoxy and a good deal of heterodoxy; a dash of agnosticism—so fine a word that it ought to mean something—and a dash of fine speculation, and a bar of advanced thinking: and this is the Church's coat of many colours! Better

be a genuine idolater than a trifling and frivolous professor of the true faith! We may not try to substitute one god for another, or to patch out our tattered theology by borrowing and misappropriating the ideas of the enemy. There is one fountain at which we may draw and draw evermore, and that is the Bible. We never knew any man oppose the Bible who had really comprehended its inner meaning. No man can doubt the inspiration of the Bible who has read it,—not galloped through it, but sat down with it, talked with it, communed with it, till his heart burned within him, and until the heavens touched the earth in condescending love, and earth bloomed with heaven's summer because of its access of light. No man ever spent his days and nights with the Bible, his summers and winters, and all the round of life, without feeling, Surely God is in this book: this is none other than the book of God—than the book of heaven. But once lose that reverence, and we take the course of Ahaz; we go down and see what is being done in the world. One man has been delivered by wealth, and we begin to worship the golden idol; another has been delivered by various factitious circumstances, and we instantly become artificers in life, and try to mechanise life, and set into relation forces that can co-operate with one another, and modify one another, and issue in a plentiful harvest of good fortune for ourselves. And after all this toil we come home wasted, weakened in every joint, loosened in every nerve, the subjects of a complete and disastrous collapse.

Now let us read the verse in its entirety:

"For he [Ahaz] sacrificed unto the gods of Damascus, which smote him: and he said, Because the gods of the kings of Syria help them, therefore will I sacrifice to them, that they may help me. But they were the ruin of him and of all Israel [*lit.* and they (*i.e.* those very gods) were to him to make him stumble, and all Israel. The mode of expression, as well as the thought expressed, is highly characteristic] (xxviii. 23).

Local gods are full of prejudice; sectarian gods will not bless the men that go to the next church. The gods of the Syrians are supposed to favour the Syrians only—little gods, mean, poor-hearted gods, little shrivelled tearless gods, petting their own idolaters after a superstitious fashion, but having nothing to do with the great human heart in all the tragedy of its

meaning. That is the history of sectarianism everywhere. Only that God is true, though he be but a painted deity, that loves the world. The artist that painted such a god created him. This is the glory of the Bible, that it reveals a God who loves all men, who redeemed all men, who is no respecter of persons. A God that respects persons pays his Godhead for his elevation. How many men have been mistaken in seeking false inspiration or in coveting false benedictions! The young man says he has a difficult task to-morrow, he is to meet persons with whom he has no sympathy and from whom he expects no quarter; constitutionally, he is nervous, self-distrustful, somewhat afraid of a certain aspect of controversy: he therefore says, I will fortify myself, I will take wine, the wine will quicken the flow of my blood, will pleasantly and usefully excite the nervous centres, and I shall go forward boldly and confidently and make the best of myself;—but it was the ruin of him! Wine never made a man really bold; whilst the wine was working its little temporary miracle upon him, it was sucking out his will, it was twisting the chain round his life; whilst the wine satisfied one thirst it was creating another, and he who was so bold under the inspiration of one glass of wine will need two the next time; and so he seeks a fool's helper, that will be the ruin of him. Impudence is not boldness; self-forgetfulness wrought by this demon of the pit is not power, dignity, or noblest manhood. For a time you were pert, self-sufficient, heedless, careless of every man, and could answer in retort and repartee with some sharpness: it was not you, but the evil spirit, and that evil spirit will be the ruin of you; though you start business with a heavy capital, and with many friends, and with the fullest sunshine of social favour, take heed; you may be buried with the burial of an ass. Are there not those who seek false inspiration? They will consult their false pride, they will sacrifice at the altar of appearances; over their poverty they will put some borrowed rag in the hope that observers will look at the rag and not at the poverty, and treat them as occupying a certain social position. False pride will be the ruin of them. Why do you not acknowledge poverty? There is a poverty that is honourable, there is an industry of which no man need be ashamed. If you cannot surround yourself with

liveried servants, who cares? The people who simulate amazement at your grandeur will laugh at you as fools when they go home. False appearances are the ruin of many people. They are ashamed to work, they would die if they had to clean their own doorstep. All this we must get rid of, or we shall have no real health. All tall talk, all high assumptions, all genteel lying must be swept out of the way, and men must go for what they are worth, and create an aristocracy of merit. Let capacity lead the nation: let merit be the chief partner in business: let genius wear the purple and sway the sceptre. They were the ruin of Ahaz, and they will be the ruin of every man that consults false sources of inspiration or excitement; it is not inspiration, it is insanity; it is not healthy excitement, the glow of an intelligent enthusiasm, but the madness and the lawlessness of superstition or self-idolatry.

The subject gives a word to many,—let the word be confined to one only, and that to the soul who wonders why his child should not be better. It is a wonder. There is no frivolous explanation of that mystery. Do not be content with any man who would try to daub that wall with untempered mortar. We did not expect this; we all said, The son of such a father must have on him the stamp of spiritual royalty; his very speech must be attuned to the music of heaven. God is working, and he may at last show what he has been meaning all the time; but you may rest in this solemn doctrine that judgment is in the hand of God. It is not for man to condemn or to praise beyond a very easily defined limit of criticism. God knoweth all things. He knoweth more things than you, even the boy's father, can tell, because he knows all the fathers that have gone before you. You do not know them beyond a very recent date; but every line is open, even to nakedness, to the eyes of him with whom we have to do; and he will be kind, he will be gracious. Aaron says, "His mercy endureth for ever." Israel says, "His mercy endureth for ever." All men who have had experience of him say, "His mercy endureth for ever." And all his attributes, purposes, have been gathered up into one sublime utterance, which a child can remember as to words, but which no archangel can fathom as to meaning,—"God is Love."

PRAYER.

SPEAK thy word to our hearts, thou God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and may we know that the word is thine because of our glowing love. There is no voice like thine, there is no touch like thine. Draw near to us, whisper to us, lay thy fingers upon us, and we shall be cheered and healed and made strong with thine own strength. We have wandered, but thou knowest that we love thee; we have stopped our prayers that we might do some sin, yet all the while the prayer has been uppermost and has prevailed; we have gone away from thy sanctuary, but our hearts have ached that we might return. Behold, thou hast not left us to ourselves, thou hast followed us, thy Holy Spirit has been with us, entreating, rebuking, reproaching, yet comforting: assuring us when our hunger was keenest that in our Father's house there was bread enough and to spare. Give us understanding of the times, that we may know what thy Church ought to do; bless us with the spirit of fearlessness, that we may speak the necessary word with all clearness and with the power of self-restraint and the charm of anxious modesty; may there be no sparing of wrong, may there be no compromise with evil or darkness, may no bribe be accepted at Christ's altar, but may all men be alive with the spirit of righteousness, burning with the spirit of love; then shall there come upon all thy Church a revival full of intelligence, earnest, intense, enduring, and he who is our Saviour shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied. Amen.

2 Chronicles xxix.

HEZEKIAH: A TRUE KING.

WE have not spared condemnation in the case of Ahaz. In this chapter we have once more the mystery of a bad father having a good son. There were few worse men than Ahaz; there were few better men than Hezekiah. There is a law in this progression and retrogression which we cannot understand. It is wholly bewildering that a philosopher should have a fool for a son, and that a fool should have a philosopher for his firstborn. There is one thing absolutely certain, and that is that God will have nothing to do with family respectability. When shall we learn with our heart that we cannot have respectable families, in the conventional and superficial sense of

that term? Some of the most respectable families in the world have had members of the household who have been hanged; these are never spoken about. The whole mystery of family development shows that we cannot grow plants pure, wholly beautiful, and entirely perfect, outside the walls of paradise; we may cover up a good deal, we have skill in the uses of concealment; but there is the striking historical fact that God will not allow one family to boast over any other family as to its respectability in his sight: for no flesh shall glory in the presence of God. What we have termed natural logic would seem to have required that the son of Ahaz should be a degree worse than himself. Instead of the operation of that natural logic, that external philosophy of heredity, here is a man who stands up a very prince of heaven, his heart burning with the fire of piety, his whole soul troubled because of the corruptness of the nation, and his spirit bowed down within him because the temple is like a sealed tomb. Let us look steadfastly at facts, and never boast; for the respectability that culminates in us may suffer an appalling collapse in the man who comes next.

Hezekiah no sooner began to reign than he began to make his influence felt.

"He in the first year of his reign, in the first month [that is, in the first sacred month], opened the doors of the house of the Lord, and repaired them" (v. 3).

All this is negative. There must have been some man who had closed the doors. That man was Hezekiah's own father; yet the very first thing which Hezekiah does is to undo what his father did. There are precedents that are only to be shattered. There is a law of continuity which must be broken. The only true continuity is a continuity of righteousness, truth, pureness —real, healthy, honest piety. Continuance in anything else is but an aggravation of blasphemy; it is the consistency of evil; it is the monotony of darkness. Sometimes all that we can do is to open the doors. Even that, however, is a work of mercy, and means much more than is made evident in the letter. When the father leaves the door open at night, it is that some wandering child may be permitted to enter, should he return in the darkness. The father, when he leaves that door open,

offers a whole liturgy of prayer, looks heaven in the face with an expression that means the very eloquence of intercession, so eloquent as to be silent, so sublime as to be mute. When the poor cottier lights the little candle and sets it in the little window, it is more than a candle, it is a beacon: it is a welcome, it is a sign; it means longing, expectation, hospitality; it means all that can be meant by love that bleeds itself to death. He does no small good to the nation who opens the doors of the sanctuary. They are doors which ought never to be shut. There is a cipher which men ought to be able to understand; there need not be written upon the church doors welcome to all who would come in; it will be enough to have the doors standing open. Open doors mean welcome, offers of light and truth, and all the hospitality of grace. Hezekiah, therefore, begins well, though he begins negatively.

Then he must still continue his negative course, even though he seek co-operation. Bringing in the priests and the Levites, and gathering them together, as if in public meeting, he says:

"Sanctify now yourselves, and sanctify the house of the Lord God of your fathers, and carry forth the filthiness out of the holy place" (v. 5).

That also is negative:—remove incumbrances, take away nuisances, abolish unholy memories and traditions; break in upon all manner of desecration. You cannot use the temple aright until you have disinfected it; the beasts who have turned it into a den have left behind them signs of their ungenial and all-desecrating presence. Before we can pray we must "carry forth the filthiness out of the holy place." He who begins thus fundamentally will close triumphantly. Hezekiah is in no more haste to accomplish his purpose, and therefore he will accomplish it all the sooner. We know when men handle their work like masters. Hezekiah's beginning augurs well. He makes haste slowly. He has about him that marvellous deliberation which expresses, not indifference, but such intensity of purpose that it can afford to be calm; it is the last expression of resolution. Let us have no rush, uproar, confusion, man falling over man, and one stream colliding with another; but let everything be done patiently, critically, and orderly: and who can tell what

shall be done in sixteen days? To cleanse the sanctuary is to pray. When Hezekiah opened the doors, by that very act he worshipped; when Hezekiah repaired the doors of the house of the Lord, he wrought a wondrous work upon the heart that was sore by reason of its long-continued need and its painful solitude. To repair the building is to worship the living God; to give a cup of cold water to a disciple for Christ's sake is to oblige heaven.

We make mistakes if we suppose that worship is a mere cloud, a foam of sentiment; it is work of all kinds, door-opening and lamp-lighting and floor-sweeping, cleansing, preparing, ventilating, expecting the people and welcoming them with joy; and then incense-burning, and cross-uplifting, and cry of thunderous and mute eloquence, and hymn, sweet, gentle, tender, and prayer that beats against heaven like artillery—all these things and many more are included in the complex idea of worship. Let each man, therefore, do what he can in this matter, knowing that no man works the whole ministry of worship, but that it is an act of co-operation and combination, one part working with another part, and each interrelating itself with the other, so as to constitute a sum total significant of unity, adaptation, music, and homage.

So calm is Hezekiah that he states the case in all its historical breadth, and with all the accentuating colour of painful memory and frank self-humiliation on account of sin:

"For our fathers have trespassed, and done that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord our God, and have forsaken him, and have turned away their faces from the habitation of the Lord, and turned their backs. Also they have shut up the doors of the porch, and put out the lamps, and have not burned incense nor offered burnt offerings in the holy place unto the God of Israel. Wherefore the wrath of the Lord was upon Judah and Jerusalem, and he hath delivered them to trouble, to astonishment, and to hissing, as ye see with your eyes. For, lo, our fathers have fallen by the sword, and our sons and our daughters and our wives are in captivity for this" (vv. 6-9).

He continues well; he first does something himself, then he calls upon the priests and the Levites to do something more, and having created this initial interest he proceeds to give a historical

summary of the situation. We cannot work effectively, or with any degree of divine masterliness in our sacred occupation, until we have history behind us, right up to date, so that we know what was done up to yesternight. History thus treated—massed, focussed, and brought to bear upon living men—becomes an appeal, an inspiration, an indication of the next point of progress. He who neglects history cannot read Providence. Do we comprehend the state of affairs in our own land or in lands far away? Some men do, and some do not. The men who do comprehend the estate in all its bearings and relations are the most earnest men in the Christian community. They who know least do least. They who see the whole field, and know all the forces there are at work within its four corners, are the men who are moved to deepest prayer themselves, and who are stirred to an untaught but mighty eloquence in the excitement of their hearts. Read the history of heathenism, so far as it is open, and we need no other incentive to Christian evangelisation; study the condition of barbarism, and never will the cross of Christ appear to be so dazzling a glory as after dwelling in that infinite gloom; understand what Christianity has done for the world, and then feel the necessity of extending its reign, enlarging the field of its sovereignty.

With what gentle, paternal eloquence Hezekiah addressed the men on whose co-operation he relied:

"My sons, be not now negligent: for the Lord hath chosen you to stand before him, to serve him, and that ye should minister unto him, and burn incense" (v. 11).

A pastoral king; a most shepherdly heart was the heart of king Hezekiah. There is a fatherliness that does not depend upon age. Hezekiah was not an old man: he spoke not from under a crown of hoary hairs, but he was a father because of his capacity of love, unselfish solicitude, patriotic aspiration. There are young pastors—they are born shepherds; in earliest conscious life they seem to be made to care for others. The pastor is a man who can carry all other men. A wondrous man! so many-sided, seeing all things when apparently looking at nothing; feeling everything, not requiring to have subjects urged upon him, driven into him, spelled out letter by letter to his dull stupidity;

but feeling in the morning how the world is, hearing messages in the winds that are blowing, knowing by a look how the world's health reports itself everywhere; a man who feels the pulse whilst talking about other subjects, who attracts the patient's attention to things far away that he may in that moment of release watch him with a keener vigilance. You cannot make pastors, or kings, or fathers. You can make men bear the pastor's name, or the king's name, or the father's name; but all these may be but nominal functions: we are born to our estate; our inheritance is a descent, our primogeniture is not to be broken in upon by lawyers who trifle with the letters they do not understand. Here is an entail sanctioned by heaven, an election which bears the imprimatur of God, a sovereignty which cannot be turned aside by our mechanisms and cunning devices. Have not some men a right to accost us as sons? Is there not a touch which means solicitude, brotherhood, unity, mutual understanding? No lesson does Hezekiah recite which he has learned in private; the words come to him as he needs them; they are his servants and they wait upon him, and when he opens his mouth they come and say, What wilt thou? here we are, send us. So thus he talks, with a healthy frankness, with a tender appreciation, with a majestic familiarity, with a condescension that cannot be trifled with.

What was their response? Enough to read:

"Then the Levites arose" (v. 12).

The detail follows after this, but our interest is exhausted by these four words, "Then the Levites arose." Who can forbear to answer music? When the blast falls suddenly upon the quiet air, who can refrain from replying to it, by muscular motion, by a new animation of spirits, by an access of vitality? Who can fail to be the echo of heaven's music? Yet there is a wonderful difficulty here. It is hard for men now to arise, because the call is so familiar; it has been voiced in every tone, it has taken advantage of every occasion and medium and function; and the gospel would seem sometimes as if it would fail because of the very vastness of its hospitality, because of the repetition of its miracle. It would fail if it were a human invention, but it comes and goes with that wondrous wave of human progress, which is

not the less a wave that sometimes it is refluent and sometimes aggressive. The word of the Lord is hidden in this gospel, and it must prevail, and it will prevail not the less completely that it seems to be delaying its final conquest. We cannot tell what may be done in one moment. We know not the resources of almightiness. The Levites, the priests, the people, all responded, and in little more than a fortnight everything was in order in the temple. It could not have been so but for the preparation; the time that was apparently lost at the beginning told well in the winding up. We make progress sometimes when not appearing to make it; we make no progress on other occasions, simply because we have neglected preparatory arrangements, or so called little things.

In sixteen days the burnt offering began; songs were heard, the trumpet rent the place, and all hearts quivered with joy.

Observe two points. (i.) They were old words that the people sang—

"Moreover Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praises unto the Lord with the words of David, and of Asaph the seer" (v. 30).

What do we want with new words, new hymns, new forms of praise? The time is coming—would it could hasten its longed-for advent—when there will be only one book in the Church. At present the number has been reduced in many instances to two, and one of them we do not want. The time will come when the Bible will be the only book in the house of God. What hymns like the hymns of the Bible? What devotional language like the devotional language of the Psalms? What finer teachers could we have than David and Asaph, Isaiah and the mighty minstrels and prophets of Israel? The people had the words all ready. If we want to sing we need not wait for some man to make words for us; so long as the Psalms are before us we may begin our song at once.

(ii.) Not only were the words old, the enthusiasm was new—"And they sang praises with gladness." Literally, with exultation, with rapture. Religion is nothing if not enthusiastic. Praise

without exultation is but a skeleton form. The whole place in which Christians are assembled for worship should vibrate, tingle again, because of the mighty, gracious, holy song. Here we have the changeable and the permanent: the permanent we find in "the words of David and of Asaph the seer"; and that which is changeable or capable of increase and variation is the gladness, the enthusiasm, the transport, the holy rapture. Nor was it merely vocal, in any sense of displaying musical gymnastic skill, for the people having sung with rapture, as if they had not space enough to sing in, and as if they would split the overarching heaven with their cry, "they bowed their heads and worshipped." The look was upward, downward; wild with an infinite rationalistic joy, and subdued because of a sense of the majesty of heaven.

Did the matter end with this singing? No.

"Then Hezekiah [still equal to the occasion, and keeping the oversight of it to himself] answered and said, Now ye have consecrated yourselves unto the Lord, come near and bring sacrifices and thank offerings into the house of the Lord" (v. 31).

What did the people say?

"And the congregation brought in sacrifices and thank offerings; and as many as were of a free heart burnt offerings. And the number of the burnt offerings, which the congregation brought, was threescore and ten bullocks, an hundred rams, and two hundred lambs: all these were for a burnt offering to the Lord. And the consecrated things were six hundred oxen and three thousand sheep" (vv. 31-33).

And the freewill offerings came from every quarter, until the chronicler says:

"But the priests were too few, so that they could not flay all the burnt offerings: wherefore their brethren the Levites did help them, till the work was ended, and until the other priests had sanctified themselves" (v. 34).

So that people may sometimes get ahead of the Levites. Generosity may sometimes confuse officialism. If this spirit were to seize the Church, the only man that would feel incommoded by it would be the treasurer. He would want an increase of assistance. At present he has nothing to do, but if the people could be touched by the spirit of Hezekiah the treasurer would

say, Some of you must come and assist me; the day is too short to count the gold, the time fails me when I would make record of the sacrifices of the people of God. This never can be done by exhortation; it can only be done by inspiration.

How did the matter end?

"And Hezekiah rejoiced, and all the people, that God had prepared the people: for the thing was done suddenly" (v. 36).

Observe the conjunction of words: "prepared—suddenly." That is the true order of progress—preparation as to process, suddenness as to revelation. As with the volcano: it is always gathering its heat, the moment of explosion is sudden; it always comes unexpectedly; it is like death itself, for though we have reckoned about the time death will come, when he does come, his white ghastliness makes us forget our preparation and say, It was so sudden at the last! Have we not had preparation enough? Is it not time now for enthusiasm? We have heard thousands of discourses; we have attended thousands of religious services; we have even gone so far as to criticise the services we have attended. Has there not been preparation enough? Is it not time for a little suddenness, outburst, genuine enthusiasm? "The Lord shall suddenly come to his temple." "Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host"; and yet all the ages had been preparing for that one moment. Eternity had been waiting for that crisis, and yet even then it was said, "And suddenly." "And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, a sound as of a rushing mighty wind." . . . Yet, though apparently so unexpected, "this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel."

PRAYER.

O BLESSED Son of God, thou art always being transfigured before us: and if we miss the transfiguration, it is because our eyes are closed. Every day thou dost come to the world in a new revelation, a new beauty, a new helpfulness. Thy delight is not in destruction, but in salvation; the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost. Herein is the Gospel, the sweet news, the glad tidings, the holy appeal that touches us in the depth of our distress. We needed a helper; for want of a Saviour we died; there was no eye to pity, there was no arm to save; we had been given up to the darkness of night but for the love and pity and tenderness of God. Jesus Christ, Son of God, Son of man, thou art our friend, our brother, our Saviour: yea, we hail thee equal with the Father, who is God over all, blessed for evermore; and so we seek to be made like unto thyself in all the beauty of thy holiness. We know that thou mayest always be called upon in the day of trouble; thou dost find those who are troubled in heart, and they find thee, and there is kinship between us; thou wast tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin; thou knowest the sharpness of every pain, the humiliation of every infirmity, the utter solitude of heart thou knowest: for were not the heavens darkened to thee, and did not the earth tremble as if ashamed of thee, and did not thy disciples forsake thee and flee? Yet out of all the darkness thou hast arisen, an infinite light, a glory filling the universe, the great joy of sweetest song, the object of heavenly adoration. We would know the fellowship of thy sufferings that we may know the power of thy resurrection. We may not, dare not, suffer alone; for then suffering were nought but pain, agony unprofitable and unending; but if we suffer with thee, if upon thy cross we hang in fellowship with thy pain, then we shall see the glory that lies beyond, we shall be glad with a great ecstasy, even when the darkness of night is thickest. We bless thee for thy saving power, mighty Son of God; where we fail thou dost succeed, because thou dost work with the ease of almightiness; there is no effort to thee; the All-Power cannot strain; behold, thou stoopest to touch the universe; the sun is infinitely beneath thy feet. We commend ourselves, therefore, to thee for healing, for quietness of soul in the midst of earth's great tumult, and for the final salvation of our being. We cannot tell what salvation is; our conception is narrow and shallow and poor; we shall need eternity to interpret thy meaning of salvation: we see in it all growth, all progress, an eternal advancement towards the very perfectness of God: what can we require for a schoolhouse but God's infinity, and for a day-glory but God's own splendour? In so far as we are moving on the upward line we bless thee; for this is a miracle

wrought against the gravitation of our nature, which is towards dust and meanness and death. Thou art always overriding this lower law by a greater; thou hast a grand spiritual mastery, an infinite persuasion, an allurement that gathers up into its omnipotence all contending and conflicting laws, and thou wilt out of all the stress of controversy and all the pain of war bring us to reconciliation and peace and music. Thou hast led us wondrously; we did not know one foot of the road; what we could see was like a cloud hiding a thunderbolt; but now how all things have opened up like a dawn, opened like flowers, opened like softly descending summer, which seeks out the barest places of the earth and sets a flower on them. We thank thee for all the road; when it was steepest it was healthiest; when it was darkest thy voice seemed sweetest to our listening love, and in the time when black affliction gathered, in all its branches and in all its issues, as if to overwhelm us, behold there was balm in Gilead, behold there was a physician there. We bless the Lord with organ and trumpets and stringed instruments of every name, aad we call upon all trees, and hills, and rivers, and seas, and stars to join the infinite uproar of harmony, that we may praise thee with an infinite gladness, and rejoice in thee without a cloud to hide thy face. Be with all for whom we ought to pray—for those in trouble, for those in peril on the sea; for those who are suddenly and irreparably bereaved, to whom the sun is no light and the summer no offering of flowers or fruits, to whom the whole heaven is dark. Be with those who want to return home but cannot for the multitude of devils round about them, urging them to the hell they already feel in dread anticipation; they long to come home; O thou mighty One, go forth with thine own sword, and slay the hosts of blackness and redeem the hearts that want to pray. Be with those who are in perplexity, bewilderment, all manner of trouble, touching things that recede as they approach, and speaking to things that cannot reply, and uttering all manner of imprecations without coherence, without definitions, with a blindness which indicates insanity; the Lord direct all such, and when they are putting their hand into the darkness may they be startled to find that they have touched thyself. The Lord be our light. The Lord go before us, and behind us, and on either side of us, and above us, that through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the mystery of his cross we may be lost yet found in God. Amen.

2 Chronicles xxx.

HEZEKIAH: A TRUE PRIEST.

WE have seen what a wonderful reformation was wrought by Hezekiah. We have been startled to find how much can be done by one man when he gathers himself up into his whole strength, and moves step by step under the inspiration of sacred conviction. Everything was repaired, restored, returned to its place, and now Hezekiah longs to see all Israel at worship. The idea is familiar to us, but it was novel under the circum-

stances indicated in this chapter. "Hezekiah sent to all Israel and Judah" (v. 1). Can there be anything more? A very significant line follows—"and wrote letters also." Blessed be God for that extending, including, pathetic term!—such an extension of the invitation as includes others. "And wrote letters also to Ephraim and Manasseh." He would have the northern kingdom included; he would forget all separations and boundaries; his enthusiam should overbear all mere details, and would weld together into one sacred consolidation the whole family of Israel. That family had been split up, had gone to war with itself, had become haughty as between one branch and another, and had receded with the object of founding competitive kingdoms or provinces. Under the inspiration of a sublime religious enthusiasm, Hezekiah would have them all meeting *en masse*. If anything can overcome littleness, bitterness, bigotry, sense of transient or permanent wrong, it is a great pentecostal enthusiasm. It is not a little fire that can melt some metals; we need a whole furnace, with men to watch it that it do not lose a single degree of its heat, that it be kept up to its highest possible atmosphere, so that the most stubborn metals may give way and flow out like oil. When the nation is caught in a pentecostal enthusiasm in relation to the cross, men will forgive one another all round with multiplied pardons; yea, they will so forgive as not to know they have done it, as a merely mechanical act; it will be part of their very worship, an essential feature of their own personal and spiritual life. Here is the operation of a noble instinct. When men are truly hospitable and plan a feast, how the list of guests grows! At first the proposition is for a definite number, but as a sense of hospitality warms the heart, the heart thinks of one more, and another; then suddenly the intending host says, What if this be the time for inviting ——? and then after a pause he names an alienated member of the family, saying, in hopeful monologue, This may be the time for reconciliation: who can tell? At all events he shall have a letter: that letter may be as a gospel both to him and to me. And then he bethinks himself of another who may as well be invited, until he has exhausted his space, until he has called "all Israel and Judah," and written "letters also to Ephraim and Manasseh, that they should come to the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, to keep

the passover unto the Lord God of Israel." There is a hospitality that is evangelistic. There is a movement of the heart in hospitable directions, which being properly interpreted means that God has sent forth his messengers to all hungering and thirsting men, saying that his banquet is ready. Have we lost enthusiasm? Are we still only bigots and not believers? Are we still but constables of orthodoxy, and not the preachers of the great redemption? Is the Old Testament to exceed the New in largeness of thought, in inclusiveness of generosity? Is it better to be citizens of an empire that never saw Christ in the flesh, than to be citizens of a commonwealth which boasts his name? It would be hard work to outdo Old Testament saints in anything that is good; they stand well on the page of history; and when they were true of heart what music they made in the wilderness, and in the city, and in the house of God! When they sang, the only thing they were short of was space; it seemed as if such a surging song needed a new creation for a theatre. A pity it is if we are living retrogressively, backing out of the world, instead of going forward with the step and the port of conquerors.

The passover was held. A most remarkable statement is made in connection with that event. True worship had utterly gone down; it was impossible to keep the passover at the time, and to keep it in the appointed way, but still it was kept, at a time and after a fashion peculiarly its own. Read these words—

"Yet did they eat the passover otherwise than it was written" (v. 18).

There is a prescribed religion, an orderly worship, a programme lined out in most minute detail. The passover was to be eaten upon a certain day, and was to be eaten multitudinously, that is to say, all the people were to be there in their thousands. It was not to be eaten personally and individually, or snatched at in any irregular form; it was meant to be the feast of the nation. But for various reasons the law could not be carried out literally. What did the people then do? Just what we are called upon to do: they did what was possible. We must not stand too much upon literal ceremony. If we cannot all come together to worship God in one mass, those who can come must come and do their best. If men cannot all come on the appointed day—sweet, queenly Sabbath day—let them come in at some odd time and

touch the altar; it shall be as if they had come on the appointed morning; God will accept their time; God will put himself at the disposal of men whose time is not their own: He is a merciful God; he knoweth our frame, he remembereth that we are dust; he knows all the conditions which surround us and limit us, and when we cannot rise to the rigorous requirements of the law he will meet us more than half-way. Jesus answered prayers on the roadside. There was a temple and there was an hour of prayer:—"Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer." That was right. But Jesus Christ did a great deal of irregular work; he made the hedgeside a sanctuary, he made the open turnpike a way that lay straight up to heaven and ended at the very throne of God. When blind men cried to him, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy upon us!" he did not refer to the temple or to the hour of prayer. Where the prayer was the answer was; where needy man is Christ will not be absent. The one condition of his presence is conscious need. Let the soul say, I want him, I pine for him—O that I knew where I might find him! and he will be there. He loves the heart that yearns for him. We need not be alone. Our solitude is a proof of our impiety. Faith lives in perpetual fellowship, hope is never out of society, yet never in it in any sense that trammels its liberty or beclouds its outlook. On the other hand, we need not make ourselves eccentric worshippers merely for the sake of being eccentric. Under the circumstances detailed in the narrative the people could do no other. Things had so disordered themselves, and all religious life had fallen into such desuetude or dilapidation, that it was impossible to keep up a punctilious observance of times and numbers and places. So the passover was eaten "otherwise than it was written." If we do not urge this term "otherwise" to false issues it may really be a most comfortable word in the matter of religious education. Apply it to irregular places, and it covers them and consecrates them. Men who cannot get to the altar in the temple may find an altar at their work, even when they have to work on the Sabbath day, as on the sea and in difficult circumstances—colonial life, wilderness life, relations that involve anxiety and danger. A man may be in church when he is thousands of miles away from any building known by that name. Let us apply this idea

to other things. It is an extraordinary thing that all men do not think alike. But they are as little divided upon religion as they are upon many other subjects which are great. Men are even divided in their political thoughts, strange as it may appear—citizens of the same country, patriots of the same empire, living and dying for the land in which they were born; yet sometimes even politicians speak loudly to one another, and loudly about one another. So in the religious world there is no monotony. Every man builds a universe for himself, even when he says nothing about it. There is a chamber of imagery in the heart, in the soul, in that spiritual mystery which lies within and makes us men. But where we are sincere, not according to the light we have, but sincere in desiring more light, we shall eat the passover, though we may eat it "otherwise than it is written": no formal Church may recognise us, no well-organised community may look upon us otherwise than with suspicion; yet all the while we may be eating bread with the Lord and having our hunger grow by what it feeds on, for having tasted that he is gracious we want to eat and to drink abundantly, endlessly, saying, Lord, evermore give us this bread.

Hezekiah showed himself to be a true priest as well as a true king, for recognising the irregularity of the work he prayed for them, saying,

> "The good Lord pardon every one that prepareth his heart to seek God, the Lord God of his fathers, though he be not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary" (vv. 18, 19).

The Lord is larger than any law. Love infinitely transcends any regulation. Say to the most eccentric minds, there is a place for you at God's feast. Say to those who cannot find brotherhood on earth, by-and-by even your peculiarity shall be explained, and you shall constitute an element in the last eternal harmony. If any man keep himself away from the feast of God's love, let him blame himself. The invitation included him, and honours his manhood by allowing him the liberty, not the right, to decline the invitation.

Did the whole matter end in spiritual excitement? Was this enthusiasm a swelling billow which, having heaved itself to the utmost, subsided with more or less of foam as it broke upon the

shore? No. Out of this enthusiasm came iconoclasm, image-breaking, the spirit of destruction. That is the real meaning of salvation. The meaning of salvation is destruction, as well as preservation. As saints go up in their structure, and in all spiritual value and nobleness, devils go down: as heaven enlarges, hell curtails—would God its last cinder would burn itself out and leave the universe clear of its awful smoke!

NOTE.

Hezekiah ("strength of Jehovah"), twelfth king of Judah, son of the apostate Ahaz and Abi (or Abijah), ascended the throne at the age of twenty-five, B.C. 726. Since, however, Ahaz died at the age of thirty-six, some prefer to make Hezekiah only twenty years old at his accession, as otherwise he must have been born when Ahaz was a boy of eleven years old. This indeed is not impossible; but, if any change be desirable, it is better to suppose that *Ahaz* was twenty-five and not twenty years old at his accession.

Hezekiah was one of the three most perfect kings of Judah (2 Kings xviii. 5). His first act was to purge, and repair, and reopen, with splendid sacrifices and perfect ceremonial, the Temple, which had been despoiled and neglected during the careless and idolatrous reign of his father. This consecration was accompanied by a revival of the theocratic spirit, so strict as not even to spare "the high places," which, although tolerated by many well-intentioned kings, had naturally been profaned by the worship of images and Asherahs (2 Kings xviii. 4). A still more decisive act was the destruction of a brazen serpent, said to have been the one used by Moses in the miraculous healing of the Israelites (Numb. xxi. 9), which had been removed to Jerusalem, and had become, "down to those days," an object of adoration, partly in consequence of its venerable character as a relic, and partly perhaps from some dim tendencies to the ophiolatry common in ancient times. To break up a figure so curious and so highly honoured showed a strong mind, as well as a clear-sighted zeal, and Hezekiah briefly justified his procedure by calling the image "a brazen thing." When the kingdom of Israel had fallen, Hezekiah extended his pious endeavours to Ephraim and Manasseh, and by inviting the scattered inhabitants to a peculiar Passover kindled *their* indignation also against the idolatrous practices which still continued among them. This passover was, from the necessities of the case, celebrated at an unusual, though not illegal (Numb. ix. 10, 11) time, and by an excess of Levitical zeal, it was continued for the unprecedented period of fourteen days. For these latter facts the chronicler (2 Chron. xxix., xxx., xxxi.) is our sole authority, and he characteristically narrates them at great length. It would appear at first sight that this passover was celebrated immediately after the purification of the Temple; but careful consideration makes it almost certain that it could not have taken place before the sixth year of Hezekiah's reign, when the fall of Samaria had stricken remorseful terror into the heart of Israel (2 Chron. xxxi. 1; xxx. 6, 9).—SMITH'S *Dictionary of the Bible.*

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, fill our hearts with thy light; establish our confidence in thy righteousness; lead us in the paths of uprightness for thy name's sake. All the work is thine; we cannot do it, it is too great for us; but thou hast made us willing in the day of thy power that thou shouldest do it within us and for us altogether. We would yield ourselves to thy ministry, thou holy Spirit; we want light, rest, peace, hope. Thou knowest how many things are against us, always fighting against our prayer and our best desire and our tenderest longing; but they that are for us are more than they that be against us. We will trust in the living God, we will look unto the Almighty for defence, we will stand within the sanctuary of thy righteousness, and thy love, and thy pity; then shall we be comforted, how dark soever the sky may be, and how uncertain soever may be the blessings of this life. Teach us the right method of looking at all things; may we not be busy here and there, and let the king pass by without seeing him; for then we should play the fool before God, and spend our industry in vanity. Give us to feel what is important, and what is not important; and may we, having ascertained that the soul is more than the body, and the future more than the present, and the spiritual greater than the material, betake ourselves with faithful constancy to the reading of thy will, and to obedience to all thy precepts. The time past should more than suffice, for we have wasted it: O that we had hearkened unto thy law and kept thy commandments! for then had our peace flowed like a river, and our righteousness like the waves of the sea. We bless thee for the power to repent, we thank thee that we are not reduced to the callousness which does not feel how wicked we have been; whilst we can thrill under thy rebukes, we shall have hope in thy mercy; because we know the terrors of thy judgment, we shall surely be led to the tenderness of thy cross. Grant unto us a manifold Christian experience, rich, noble, generous; may we be able to appreciate all the way of life, and to sympathise with all men in all the variety of their experience; then shall we be shepherds appointed by Christ, inspired by the Spirit of Christ, and accepting Christ as the one guide and Lord. Blessed Saviour, mighty Son of God, wounded but not destroyed, buried but risen again, to thee we come with full hearts, with memory charged with thankfulness, and again we make oath and say that by the grace of God we will be Christ's evermore. Help us through the weariness of life; whisper to us that life is but a poor dull grey day which prepares the way for the dawn of heaven; then shall we be patient, resigned, quiet, and our ears shall be quickened to hear the sounds of our Lord's coming, and many a time we shall be surprised into sudden and ecstatic joy. Amen.

2 Chronicles xxxi.

"Now when all this was finished, all Israel that were present went out to the cities of Judah, and brake the images in pieces, and cut down the groves, and threw down the high places and the altars out of all Judah and Benjamin, in Ephraim also and Manasseh, until they had utterly destroyed them all" (v. 1).

THE PROSPERITY OF HEZEKIAH.

THIS enthusiasm is well balanced. It prayed well, struck well; it was noble in homage, it is majestic in assault. It does not strike with a feeble hand, as if reluctantly or doubtingly. Mark the word "utterly." It is for want of that word that so many men have failed. Many men have cut off the heads of weeds. Any man can do that. The weed is in the root, and the root is not straight down in the earth, so that it can be taken out easily; after a certain depth it ramifies, and care must be taken that we get out every fibre and filament, and having got it out turn it upside down, and let the sun do the rest. A man has undertaken to abstain from some evil pursuit for a month: he has clipped off the top of the weed and looks just as well as anybody else; but he is not; he has still the root in him, and that must be taken out, though he be half murdered in the process. What advantageth it any man that he should gain the whole world and lose himself? What if God makes me a present of the sun if I have no hands to take it?—I have lost myself! This word "utterly," then, must be brought into the speech, or the eloquence is imperfect; it is not only rhetorically incomplete, it is morally without balance and dignity and force. Sometimes we need a redundance of words in order to explain our whole meaning. The sentence would have read well without the word "utterly"; the word "destroyed" would seem not to require any qualification; but man is more than a grammarian, he is a sinner; and if every word in every language that can mean limitation, purification, discipline, destruction, be not applied to him, he will find out where that word is wanting, and go from it into his old habits. Every man who knows himself knows that he needs to be guarded, braced up, watched, fortified at every point, even at the risk of being a little rhetorically redundant. For want of an epithet a sentence may appear

to be so thin that the sinner can break through the cordon and get back to his evil ways.

This, then, is what we have to do. We must also move by the same logic. To utterly destroy an idol first, even were it possible, would not be lasting. What must come first in the order of time? Religious enthusiasm, religious conviction; deep, intense spiritual fellowship with God; a look into heaven; vital sympathy with the cross; a purification of hand, and lip, and tongue, and body, soul, spirit, by the passover, rightly eaten; and then what giants will go forth with axes of lightning to smite pillar and asherah and idol and every vain thing. Men cannot strike finally if they act only as reformers. Reform is an active word, and is to be regarded with great favour, and is the only word that is permissible under some circumstances; but the greater word is regeneration. Reform that does not point to regeneration is a waxen flower that will melt when the sun is well up in the heavens. It is not in man to regenerate therefore; this is the mystery of God's action in the soul. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost." When the man is new the action will be new. The great process does not begin with the action, but with the soul. Make the tree good, then the fruit will be good. Do not take beautifully moulded fruit, tinted with a fine cunning mimicry of nature, and tie it with silken threads to the branches. It is a lie! presently the sun will come and look upon it and say, "Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment?" Are we rooted in God?

If this view of things required confirmation we should find it in another verse of the narrative. The explanation of Hezekiah's enthusiasm and success we find in verse 21—

"And in every work that he began in the service of the house of God and in the law, and in the commandments, to seek his God, he did it with all his heart, and prospered."

Heartless piety is the worst form of infidelity. Have hope of every energetic infidel; but have no hope of heartless professors of Christianity. They are dead. They know the right, they acknowledge it, they nod assent to its claims; but they are never

moved to passion of homage or passion of praise by a due and comprehensive recognition of the mystery of the cross. Nearly all churches are dying out. "Respectability" is killing them. The word of the Lord cannot thrive on intellectual patronage; because there is no deepness of earth it soon withers way. The Church will die a respectable death unless it draw its life from the heart. Everything is dependent upon the condition of the moral emotions, the moral aspirations of mankind. Who that has seen the summer sun would think of turning aside to see a newly-lighted candle? A sense of contempt would be immediate, and as definite as it would be intelligible. So he who has seen Christ—really seen him, transfigured; he who has, so to say, caught Christ at unawares by waking up suddenly in the midst of the night-time and seeing him, would never care to come down-hill again, or speak to crowned king or mighty man who dies as he boasts his might. When the heart has been once filled with the Son of God, and thrilled by the consciousness of his presence, carried away by the enthusiasm of his love, everything looks small and mean and unworthy; the jingle of gold is harshness, the flutter of beauty is but the palpitation of weakness, the charm of art is but a trick of necromancy. There is no life but in Christ, no joy but in Christ, no hope but in Christ; he is all our salvation and all our desire.

Is Hezekiah to stand before New Testament saints in this matter? We cannot create enthusiasm by any mechanical arrangements. It is impossible to organise a revival that is worth the process through which it passes. We cannot make flowers and plant them; we must wait for their coming up at the bidding of the sun. Simulation means weakness. But in our hatred of hypocrisy we need not be afraid of the passion of enthusiasm. Some people do reason thus, and reason viciously. They are afraid of making too much profession; they are afraid of being demonstrative in piety, because they have seen so many demonstrative persons come to humiliation and shame. The reasoning is neither exact, generous, nor pious; especially is it not godly, because it ignores the action of the Divine Spirit in the creation and sustenance of true enthusiasm. Any passion we can excite will die, leaving behind it nothing but coldness, and a memory,

it may be, of the abjectest humiliation. We are speaking of divinely created enthusiasm, passion that expresses itself in the whole life because the organ of the soul is touched by the fingers of God. When the organ keys are touched by the mysterious fingers of sympathy and all manner of masonry, and yet they yield no sound, what say you? You say, This is a mimic organ; this is a lie! But if when so touched every key responds and the whole instrument is alive with answering love, then you say, This is not the organ only but the player; the organ was silent until these skilled fingers touched it: oh that this magician would continue his magic! for every sound ennobles and enlarges and gladdens the life of the listener. This is the enthusiasm for which we are pleading. True, there have been hypocritical imitations; but they must go only for what they are worth, and they must not be allowed to intrude upon right values and right actions. What should we say to this man? His speech is clear enough, and runs thus—I cannot take the money, because there is a good deal of counterfeit coin in the world. How should we really estimate that man? should we not say, how can there be any counterfeit coin in the world if there is no good coin? Precisely so. When a man says, "I cannot be enthusiastic in piety, because I have seen a good many enthusiastic individuals whose profession has turned out to be a lie," do not blame the enthusiasm; their very hypocrisy is a tribute to the truth; they found it worth their while to be hypocrites; it was a living for them; it was a card that gave them admission to respectable circles; without that hypocrisy no man would have spoken to them whose word was worth listening to. Hypocrisy is a tribute to sincerity. He who imitates a good man unconsciously pays a tribute to the goodness of the man whose morality he imitates. On the other hand, there is a quiet enthusiasm. All men do not express themselves in the same language, with the same fervour, with the same sacred frenzy. There is some enthusiasm so quiet that we are not aware of its existence; the children at home are not aware of it; those who are associated with such enthusiasts in the companionship of life are wholly unaware of the existence of the enthusiasm; the Church is unaware of it; the only man who is aware of it is the man himself, and when it becomes thus confined to his consciousness,

what wonder if the world should begin to feel some suspicion of its existence? Every man is not an enthusiast simply because he is quiet; ingratitude can be silent; want of appreciation need never enter into demonstration of neglect, indifference, or hostility. The only thing we ought to aim at is true, genuine consecration, seeking our work, and doing it with all our heart.

What came after this? "Prosperity." Hezekiah "prospered"; wherever he walked flowers sprang up in his footprints; every thought was followed by a miracle of realised love. God walks with the good man. God rewards enthusiasm. We do not throw our divinely-inspired passion away to a cold selfish world; our passion may appear to be frenzy, enthusiasm, insanity, but the reply is before us, we can return it, and if we can return it with a sound heart blessed are we, for then we can say, with moral emphasis, If we be beside ourselves, it is unto God. May we understand what it is to eat the passover, and having eaten it to rise with moral dignity, that we may smite every unholy thing, and go about our whole business with a united heart, expecting the blessing of God which created the enthusiasm daily to sustain its holy fury. Then shall the world know that there are Christians in it, spiritually-minded men; men whose citizenship is in heaven; men whose whole life is kindled by a great expectation, being nothing short of the descent of the Lord from heaven, in what form soever it may please that Lord to come.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, thou hast come unto us in the person of thy Son. We cannot see thyself, but we can see Jesus Christ, Son of man, Son of God; we can hear his voice, and feel the power of his words, and answer the tenderness of his appeal. We come to the incarnate God, to the everlasting word, to the mystery of godliness; we need it all, we can receive it all; we become larger as we gaze upon it: this is the mystery of our constitution, which thou thyself hast created, and by which thou dost prove to us that we are made in the image and likeness of God. We bless thee for all religious aspirations and desires, and for all impulses that compel us to look above for satisfaction; these are the creations of God, these are the miracles of grace. The dust cannot satisfy us; we have drunk the rivers dry, and our thirst still burns; we must drink of the river of God, which is full of water. Only life's river can satisfy our burning thirst. Herein, too, we see that we are made in the image and likeness of God, and to God we must go in daily prayer, and constant love, and heightening expectation. Give us bread in thy house, and in thy house give us water to drink; open our eyes that we may behold wondrous things out of thy law; purify our tongue than no unclean word may escape our lips, and grant unto us that simplicity of heart, that loftiness of purpose and of motive, which can only be created and directed by God the Holy Ghost. Dry all our tears; help us to carry our burdens with the dignity of patience, and may we always look to the Strong for strength, and not mock ourselves by calling upon our own weakness. We pray at the cross, we tarry at the cross; at the cross thou wilt find us, at the cross thou wilt answer us. Amen.

2 Chronicles xxxii.

THE OVERTHROW OF SENNACHERIB.

THE thirty-second chapter opens with words which we ought to be able to continue, if there is any inspiration in fancy, if we have any sense of true logic. The opening words are "After these things." The narrator may retire, for after our previous studies we are able to complete the sentence. Let us see whether this be not so, or whether imagination may be worsted in this insignificant attempt to eke out a record begun by inspiration. What "these things" are we know right well. We have already gone through them one by one. The

last declaration may be taken as summing up the whole, and thus bringing our memory up to the immediate line of the text:—"And in every work that he [Hezekiah] began in the service of the house of God, and in the law, and in the commandments, to seek his God, he did it with all his heart, and prospered" (xxxi. 21). As we have just said, this thirty-second chapter opens thus:—

"After these things, and the establishment thereof" (v. 1).

What can there be after these things but heaven? Have there not been times in our experience when we could have gone up, passed into the quiet and holy heavens, as men whose souls were fit for divinest blessedness? Surely Hezekiah may now be released. He has done bravely, we all hail him with acclamation. He stands out like a Saul above all the kings of Judah, and with one accord we are prepared to say, Open the portals of heaven, and let him pass in as a servant good and faithful. How poorly we eke out the narrative: the agony has yet to come. We are poor at conjecture as to the course which inspiration ought to take. We are impatient; our punctuation is all wrong; where we assign a period God opens a new paragraph longer and wearier than any we have had before. While Hezekiah was musing before the very portals of the upper sanctuary, a blow as of a thunderbolt was delivered on the door of his kingdom. He had hardly finished his prayer till a heathen assailant challenged him to war. He will fight none the worse for having prayed so well. Always dread the religious man in any controversy. He may not be so noisy as others, but he wears well; he never gives in until omnipotence is tired; he cannot surrender; it is the fuel that must give way, not the fire. What did Hezekiah say? Precisely what we should expect him to say, for has he not been walking with God? Having made his military arrangements he said—for he had a gift of eloquence—

"Be strong and courageous, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him: for there be more with us than with him" (v. 7).

This is how prayer is answered! Not by some mysterious palpitations in the clouds, but by a consciousness of added

courage, by a consciousness of invincible energy, by an assurance which nothing can modify that in all battle in which truth and error are the combatants the victory must lie with truth. Sennacherib was no mean enemy. He mocked the faith of Israel, he scorned the theology of Judah. He spoke with true eloquence:—

"Who was there among all the gods of those nations that my fathers utterly destroyed, that could deliver his people out of mine hand, that your God [how his voice quivered with urgent scorn as he said "your God"] should be able to deliver you out of mine hand? Now therefore let not Hezekiah deceive you, nor persuade you on this manner, neither yet believe him: for no god of any nation or kingdom was able to deliver his people out of mine hand, and out of the hand of my fathers: how much less shall your God [whom nobody has ever seen, a God without a figure, a God without a painted arm] deliver you out of mine hand" (vv. 14, 15).

Sennacherib is to be admired. He was a pagan, but he was a believing pagan. He was a pagan who was not ashamed of his theology, as many Christians are. He was perfectly willing to meet the theological appeal with a theological retort: If it was a battle of gods, his god would win. Better have an imperfect creed and real honest faith in it, than have a magnificent theology and pay no attention to its obligations. There are honest pagans. There are Sennacheribs that are to be respected. There are Christian professors that are to be held in contempt; their orthodoxy is but a skeleton, their theological thinking is but a repetition of what somebody has told them, a servile obeisance before the idol of tradition; it is not faith, it can never win a battle. Infinitely better be a believing Sennacherib whose creed is pagan through and through, than be the most orthodox believer in Christianity who never obeys the commandments nor enjoys the beatitudes. Sennacherib is to be heard with respect. He is evidently a strong man; there is no feebleness in his tone; when he moves he moves altogether; when he advances, men say, The sun darkens and a storm will suddenly burst. Christians, in many cases, are "not well"; they are infirm, they are timid; they want to lodge in some vast wilderness; they do not want to be disturbed; sometimes even they do not want to hear a sermon that would fix their attention, they would prefer an anecdote which amuses their curiosity. If thus we go down Sennacherib will win,

and ought to win. Let earnest men, though they be pagans, occupy the field, rather than that it should be encumbered by men who think that they know what is right and orthodox and true, but who never respond with passion and sacrifice to the claims of their faith.

Then came the crisis :—

"And for this cause Hezekiah the king, and the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz, prayed and cried to heaven" (v. 20).

Now they are in close quarters. Heaven has been spat upon by the Assyrian boaster: how will Heaven reply? With great pomp and circumstance? No. We shall measure Heaven's view of the situation by Heaven's answer. Is the Lord troubled?—

"And the Lord sent an angel, which cut off all the mighty men of valour, and the leaders and captains in the camp of the king of Assyria" (v. 21).

What! only one angel? that is all. Sennacherib talked as if he could have handled ten thousand legions of angels. That was his boasting; that was his ignorance. It takes a loud voice to fill the universe. The Lord detached one angel, and as it were said to him, Rectify this; and the angel with invisible scimitar cut off the heads of all the leaders and captains and mighty men of valour, and Sennacherib could not put a single head on again. "So he returned with shame of face to his own land."* "Put up thy sword again into his place. . . . Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?" There are spiritual ministries. We may call them sometimes by natural names, because our

* Sennacherib was subsequently murdered by his sons, as he was praying in the house of Nisroch his god (2 Kings xix. 36, *seq.*; 2 Chron. xxxii.; Isaiah xxxvii.). The chronicler tells us of the peace and prosperity in which Hezekiah closed his days. In later times, he was held in honour as the king who had "after him none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him" (2 Kings xviii. 5); in Jer. xxvi. 17 the elders of the land cite him as an example of pious submission to the word of the Lord spoken by Micah; and the son of Sirach closes his recital of the kings with this judgment—that of all the kings of Judah, "David, Hezekiah, and Josiah alone transgressed not, nor forsook the law of the Most High" (Ecclus. xlix. 4).

piety shrinks from uttering its testimony in frank enthusiasm; but call these ministries by what name we may, there they are:—blights; sudden darknesses; uncalculated storms; the wind blowing from all points of the compass at once; mid-day turned into midnight; mental confusion; a miracle wrought in the memory, so that men cannot tell one another's names; a miracle wrought in speech, so that men forget their common grammar and cannot address each other coherently. Singular things have happened in history. If some brave, pious, consecrated souls have called such ministries by angelic names, their poetry came near to inspiration. The irrational criticism is to deny the plainest facts. Hezekiah was human, human enough to slip a little, not much. We could find fault with him. It is said that a ship under the best navigation moves in a zigzag line. Were our vision quick enough to see the whole motion of the vessel we should detect this peculiarity of advance. But there is in all movement that is rational and calculated what is termed tendency, and in the long run tendency counteracts irregularity or zigzag, and the vessel is brought to its desired haven. It is so with the life-vessel. What zigzag action there often is! We know it, if observers do not. How seldom we go straight on with any mathematical directness. We turn to the right hand and to the left hand; but if the tendency of the life be right, if the dominating motive be good, if the supreme purpose be healthy and pious, we shall come to our desired haven, into peace.

Hezekiah lies in the chiefest of the sepulchres of the sons of David; all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem did him honour at his death. These are the men who redeem history from contempt; these are the men we want to see soon after we cross the final river. Sweet souls! spirits that help our deep communion with heaven, hearts that found their joy in the sanctuary. By the grace of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, we may attain a relative eminence, and prove that even in so cloudy a life as this it is possible to get occasional gleams of light that tell us how near is the land where there is no night, no death.

PRAYER.

O THOU gracious Father, help us to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. We know how great a miracle we thus ask at thy hands, but they are hands almighty, and thine heart toward us is full of purposes of love. We are not abashed by the greatness of our request. Thou hast taught us to pray for great things; now we pray for the greatest of all, that we may be transformed into the likeness of thy Son Jesus Christ. We have been with him, we have read his words, we have listened to him as he has uttered thy gospel, and we are charmed by his ineffable simplicity, yet his infinite mysteriousness. We long to be like him. There was no guile in his heart; there was no vice in his hand; there was no wavering in all his behaviour. He was the only-begotten Son of the Father. He has revealed the Father unto us, and called upon us to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. But how can we be? Our strength fails, our hope expires in darkness; we have no confidence. We bless thee for want of self-trust: may we not therefore hope that we may trust in thee the more, yea wholly, without break or reserve? This we would now do. Work the miracle of faith in the heart of every man; give him to feel that sight is nothing, and that all his senses do but mislead him unless they be inspired by the living God; then the touch of the hand shall discover the presence of the Divine One everywhere, and the eye shall behold him in the fleeting cloud, in the blooming flower, in all the event and music of life. We know thy law, and yet we break it; we know what is right, and yet we do not pursue it with diligence, with constancy, with loyalty of love. Is there not some joy even in wrong-doing—something that ministers to momentary desire, and that overthrows the soul, depleting it and making it poor? Surely thou wilt not leave us to see corruption; thou wilt rather find us and save us, purifying our whole soul, and making it glow with divinest love. Sometimes we have almost seen thee; now and again we think we have had glimpses of the Jerusalem that is above; occasionally the dull noise of the world has been broken in upon by strains and songs which must have come downwards from the heavens. In all these things we find beginnings, and hints, and encouragements; may they grow in their influence, may they abound in their multiplicity, that so we may be lured and held up and mightily comforted and sustained in this life-and-death struggle of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Comfort all that mourn; let the prisoner hear at least some kind hand upon the lock of his dungeon; may those who sit in sadness see gracious light; and may the man who is farthest away from home hear a voice calling him back again; may he believe it and answer it and return. We always pray at the cross; without the cross we

cannot pray; it opens heaven, it creates peace, it answers tremendous accusations; it is charged with the spirit of sacrifice, it throbs with the spirit of comfort. Amen.

2 Chronicles xxxiii.

HEZEKIAH'S SUCCESSORS.

HOW will the history now run? Surely it has reached a level from which it cannot drop. We shall hear no more of bad kings of Judah. So we should say, but this chapter corrects our impressions:—

"Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty and five years in Jerusalem: but did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, like unto the abominations of the heathen, whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel" (vv. 1, 2).

Manasseh was sublimely energetic in evil. He did not serve the devil with a slack hand:—

"For he built again the high places which Hezekiah his father had broken down, and he reared up altars for Baalim [the plural again], and made groves, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them. Also he built altars in the house of the Lord, whereof the Lord had said, In Jerusalem shall my name be for ever. And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord" (vv. 3-5).

And the sixth verse concludes, "He wrought much evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke him to anger." He multiplied his sin. So far he left no false impression upon the public mind. He wrought as if he were in a good cause. Nor did he work privately, but in broadest daylight, as if he were really serving the Lord that kindled the sun that gave him the light in which he wrought his vicious ministry. Is there not something to be grimly respected even here? There is a great deal of mischief wrought that is not detected. This man Manasseh was a brave sinner, in the sense of going out early in the morning and continuing late at night, serving the devil with both hands. Yet there was a kind of religiousness in all his action. Let us say it was his conception of its religiousness that fired his enthusiasm. He was wrong, but he was violently wrong. There was no blush of shame upon his cheek as he did this evil; he seemed to say, after every stroke of service, I wish it had been completer in its energy, preciser in its delivery. He seemed to say every night, Would God the sun had

stood still, and I would have had an idol on every altar of Israel; to-morrow there shall stand on Israel's altar a carven image that shall contemn and despise Israel's God: other men have set idols on the tops of pillars and in the shady groves; I will set an idol in the sanctuary; I will fill the so-called house of prayer with images; I will take the choicest places in the sanctuary and fill these with graven figures. Shall we enter into a competitive examination as to energy on the part of evil-doers and on the part of worshippers? They who have done evil might come well off in some competitions.

We shall now see what a man may be in the matter of idolatry.

"He set a carved image, the idol which he had made, in the house of God" (v. 7).

This is a mournful episode in the history of depravity; not only did the man make the idol, but he set it up in God's house as if it were there of right. How few men simply plunge into evil; how the most of us approach the pit gradually, almost indeed imperceptibly. But the sin is in the thought. God knoweth our thought afar off, in its very protoplasm, its earliest inception, ere yet it is patent to the mind of its own creator. We sin, then, still in thought a little more; the faint outline becomes a semi-visible spectre; we encourage it to return to-morrow, and the following night, and it enlarges upon our vision, and we feel the magic of familiarity; then we turn the thought into words, and start at our own voice; we try the repetition and feel a little stronger; we renew the exercise, and become familiar with all its wicked play; then we become audacious, still confining the action largely within ourselves; afterwards we seek collateral development, and thus there comes round about us a strange interlineation of actions, ministries, suggestions, supports, until we find ourselves setting up our idol in God's own house. To such lengths may we go! The young man never supposed he would die a drunkard when he finished his mother's glass of wine; in that sip was hell, and he knew it not. Men may come not to idol-making only, so that in their own houses they may have a place for household gods, but they may grow so bold in iniquity as to use the sanctuary of God itself for the worship of evil spirits. Thus we should be careful about the spirit of veneration. Loss

of reverence is loss of spiritual quality. Better have a little tinge of superstition than be altogether devoid of veneration. To have any spiritual relation is to be in a happy condition compared with the soul that has nothing but matter, and that has gone in its foolish imagining to make matter of itself. Better peasant housewife with her sprig of rosemary or rowan tree laid away to affright the ghosts, than the house in which there is no recognition of spirit, angel, futurity, immortality, God; from the one house there may be a way into a larger morning than yet has dawned on time, but from the other house there could only be some back way into some deeper darkness.

"And the Lord spake to Manasseh, and to his people: but they would not hearken" (v. 10).

These are what we call remonstrances. Sometimes the expostulation is addressed to the heart in a sweet tone; it comes through the ministry of father, mother, pastor, friend, nearest and dearest one; sometimes it is lowered to a whisper; then it becomes poignant as a cry, then it becomes importunate as shower upon shower of gracious rain; then there comes into it an indication of heaven's pain and torment, because so much is despised and rejected that is evidently of God. "My Spirit shall not always strive with man." Is it possible for God to speak and man not to hearken? We should dispute it as a theory—we are bound to own it as a fact. A child can shut out the mid-day sun. There is no summer that ever warmed the earth that can get into a house if the owner of that house determine to block out the genial blessing. We can keep Christ standing outside, knocking at the door; we can say in bitterness of soul, Let him stand there, though his locks be heavy with the dew of night. We can multiply impiety towards God.

What after this?

"Wherefore the Lord brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon" (v. 11).

The king had his way there. The wicked man is always weak. If this word rendered "among the thorns" be not a proper name, then it has a singular significance: the king of

Assyria took Manasseh with hooks, put a hook through his nostril, put a hook through his lip, and carried him to Babylon. So have we seen an ox carried to the slaughter-house. The man who was thus treated had despised remonstrance. The Lord did not leap upon him at once. "He that being often reproved hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy." Observe how the word "suddenly" comes in. It comes in after the assurance that the reproof has been "often"—that is to say, the reproof has been repeated in various forms, in various tones, under various circumstances, and reproof having been driven back the Lord brings in the punishment which cannot be averted.

Then came the inevitable cry:—

"And when he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed unto him" (vv. 12, 13)

A wonderful word is that which is rendered "besought the Lord his God": literally, stroked his face; petted, caressed the Lord his God. What a fool the sinner always is, and to what abject humiliation he is brought. How riotous for a time! but gravitation is against him. The uplifted arm cannot wield the axe long; it fights against the geometry of the universe. God is against the wicked man. For a time Manasseh appears to succeed, but the time is short. So let the lesson abide with us. Have we set ourselves against the Lord and against his anointed? How irrational, how disproportionate the battle! Will not the angels weep to see how the battle is set in array—on the one hand omnipotence, on the other a cloud of insects? Might not the universe cry unto God not to strike? He does not want to deliver the blow; he says judgment is his strange work, and mercy is his peculiar delight; he says, "Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die?" "As I live, saith the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked." God has no pleasure in death of any kind. In him is life, and he would have the universe live a truly harmonic, pure, beautiful, devout life; but his spirit, as has just been quoted, shall not always strive with men. Why should it? Who, then, will obey the Lord at the point of remonstrance and not go forward to the point of defiance? We are all under

the importunate entreaty of God. How wondrous is his mercy, how patient his love! "Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man open the door, I will come in." "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink." "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." "Ye will not come unto me that ye might have life." He would continue in some such words as these:—Beware lest the enemy come upon you unexpectedly, lest a hook be put in your nostrils, and you be led away into Babylon, into perdition. Let it be graven as with a pen of iron upon a rock that no man can resist God successfully. Man may have his own way, but the end thereof will be death. We can refuse to pray, but we must bear the consequences,—as we can refuse to sow seed. We can say at seed-time, No, not one handful of seed shall be sown. Man is at perfect liberty to say that, but he shall have nothing in harvest and he shall beg in winter.

"Manasseh slept with his fathers, and they buried him in his own house" (v. 20).

Yet in what sense did he sleep with his fathers, and in what sense was he buried? "The evil that men do lives after them." There was no good to inter with this man's bones, until a late period in life.* Manasseh had a son, whose name was Amon, and

When sent away as a captive to Babylon Manasseh was cast into prison (B.C. 677). Here at last he had ample opportunity and leisure for cool reflection; and the hard lessons of adversity were not lost upon him. He saw and deplored the evils of his reign. He became as a new man; he humbly besought pardon from God, and implored that he might be enabled to evince the sincerity of his contrition by being restored to a position for undoing all that it had been the business of his life to effect. His prayer was heard. His captivity is supposed to have lasted a year, and he was then restored to his kingdom under certain obligations of tribute and allegiance to the king of Assyria, which, although not expressed in the account of this transaction, are alluded to in the history of his successors (2 Chron. xxxiii. 11-13).

On his return to Jerusalem, Manasseh exerted himself to the utmost in correcting the errors of his early reign, and in establishing the worship of Jehovah in its former purity and splendour. The good conduct of his later reign was rewarded with such prosperity as enabled him to do much for the improvement and strengthening of his capital and kingdom. He thoroughly repaired the old walls of Jerusalem, and added a new wall on the side towards Gihon; he surrounded and fortified by a separate wall the hill or ridge, on the east of Zion, which bore the name of Ophel; and he strengthened, garrisoned, and provisioned "the fenced cities of Judah"

in due time Amon succeeded to the throne. Amon was but twenty-two years of age when he began to reign in Jerusalem, and he reigned only two years. What did he do within that period? A very remarkable character is given to him in a few words:—

"But Amon trespassed more and more" (v. 23).

Literally, Amon multiplied to trespass; he tried to show how much evil could be compressed into a little time. Remember his age, twenty-two; remember the period of his reign, only two years, in Jerusalem; and remember that during those two years he became an expert in all evil:—"He did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, as did Manasseh his father." How, then, was Manasseh dead? In what sense was Manasseh buried? Here is an active boy who has caught his mantle, and who is working with redoubled industry—"For Amon sacrificed unto all the carved images which Manasseh his father had made, and served them," and failed in the one point where his father excelled, for he "humbled not himself before the Lord, as Manasseh his father had humbled himself; but Amon trespassed more and more."* He had money, and he spent it lavishly at the devil's counter; he had strength, and he spared it not from the devil's service; and yet the devilry was the more complete in all evil because much of what Amon did was done under a religious guise.

It is wonderful what evil can be done under a profession of religion. Amon was sacrificing unto all the carved images; he was so religious as to be irreligious; he reached the point of exaggeration, and that point is blasphemy. Where there is mere ignorance, God in his lovingkindness and tender mercy often

(2 Chron. xxxiii. 13-17). He died in peace (B.C. 664), at the age of sixty-eight, after having reigned longer than any other king of Judah, and was buried in a sepulchre which he had prepared for himself in his own garden (xxxiii. 20).

* He appears to have derived little benefit from the instructive example which the sin, punishment, and repentance of his father offered; for he restored idolatry, and again set up the images which Manasseh had cast down. He was assassinated in a court conspiracy; but the people put the regicides to death, and raised to the throne his son Josiah, then but eight years old (2 Kings xxi. 19-26; 2 Chron. xxxiii. 21-25).

closes his eyes as if he could not see what is being done: but when it is not ignorance, but violence, determination, real obstinacy in the way of evil, and utter recklessness as to what it may cost,—what if God should be compelled to open his eyes, and look the evil man full in the face, and condemn him by silent observation? It is wonderful, too, how much evil can be done in a little time. Nothing is so easy as evil. A man could almost fell a forest before he could grow one tree. Every blow tells; every bad word becomes a great blot; there is an infinite contagion in evil; it affects every one, it poisons quickly, it makes a harvest in the night-time. To do good, how much time is required! How few people will believe that we are doing good! We have to encounter suspicion, criticism, distrust; men say, "We must wait to see the end; we cannot believe in the possibility of all this earnestness and sacrifice;" they ask questions about its probable permanence; even Christian men are apt to hinder others in endeavouring to do good. But evil has no such disadvantages to contend with. There is a consolidation in the forces of evil that is not known among the forces of good. It would seem as if the poet's description were right—"Devil with devil damned, firm concord holds." It may be that in that one energetic expression Milton has stated the reality of the case. Still the good must be done little by little; we work an hour at a time and see no result, but, because the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it, we are confident that every effort, how small soever, will come to fruitfulness in the issues of the dispensation. Then, too, good is not so quickly added up as evil. Are we altogether just in this matter of the determination of character? What is our policy? It is easy of explanation; it is difficult to reconcile with the spirit of righteousness. It runs thus: A man shall live twenty years an honest, upright, beneficent life; he shall yield to a sudden temptation, and in that one act of evil the twenty years of good shall go for nothing. Is that just? Is that as it ought to be? The answer will be this: The one act of evil threw discredit upon the twenty years of apparent good. Is that reason, or prejudice? Is it justice, or insanity? Is there no balance in life? Is there no point at which things are reckoned on both sides and the issue is determined by the Judge of the whole earth? Our custom is

not so. A man shall do a thousand good things, and they shall go for nothing in the presence of one proved apostacy; nay, they shall go for very little in the presence of one suggested apostacy. All this needs review. This cannot be right. Where is the balance? Where are the scales held by the fingers of God?

It were surely an incredible miracle if one slip should blot out ten thousand virtues—if one word should sink in oblivion a lifetime of prayer. Enough that the question be raised, for it cannot now be settled; let some take comfort who may need it herein. Society will be hard upon any one who has done a solitary evil if it has been detected and proved. Society has no mercy; society cares not for the individual; it is ruthless with the solitary offender. Blessed be God, society is not judge; the Lord reigneth; he will tell us in the issue what the sum total of life's mystery comes to; and what if he shall see, what men never yet saw, the larger good, the completer trust, the heart clinging all the time to Jesus and trusting in him wholly, though there may have been parts of the nature straying and going almost to hell? Certain it is that Amon made no secret of his departure from the ways of the right kings of Judah; he revelled in trespass; and in so far as he did this openly he is to be commended. There was no nightly poisoning of the fountain; he was no stealthy offender going out on velvet feet, in the hour when deep sleep falls upon men, to poison the well-head. Here is a man who rises early in the morning, strong to do evil, with a most inventive mind, with the left hand as skilled as the right, and both hands working earnestly and diligently in doing evil. There may be hope of such a man. When Peter cursed and swore he was not far from weeping bitterly. It is when the heart has its own chamber of imagery, its own secret doubts, well-concealed blasphemies, that it would appear to be hopeless to work any miracle in it. When the volcano bursts, explodes, pours out its lava, next season men may sow seed upon the sides of the mountain, and the year after they may cull rich harvests on the slopes down which the molten lava flowed. Some men may take heart because they have been so bad. The prodigal shall have the fatted calf killed, because he is a prodigal returned.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, have we indeed come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels? Have we but come to the door of the letter and failed to enter into the sanctuary of the spirit? We would now come; we would now realise all the meaning of this great revelation. Are we so near mount Sion? Are we close to the heavenly Jerusalem? Are angels in innumerable companies round about us and we knew it not? Are we at one with the spirits of just men made perfect? Are they still alive? The old man with whom we companied and the man older still—do they live? Do they serve? Do they sing? Are they only out of our sight, not out of thine? Blessed be God if such be the case! We shall certainly join them, and continue with them this holy service which is music, this continual sacrifice which is delight. This we have in the gospel of thy Son as our sure confidence and brightest hope. Then we will not be sad; we will drive the tears away and call them offences against God. We will see thee with the open eyes of our heart, glittering with expectation, suffused with the light of love. We bless thee for all enlargement of space, for all increase of visual power, for all the mystery of communion with the dead who live. Surely this cometh forth from the Lord of hosts and is the crown of the gospel, the bright point in the glad day of revelation. We are here for a time—how little, who knows? We spend it whilst we use it and can never recover it again,—a fleeting show, a vapour that cometh for a little time and then vanisheth away, a post in great haste, a shuttle flying hither and thither. Who can tell how little the span, how uncertain the tenure? May we so use our days as to apply our hearts unto wisdom, and may we reckon up so carefully as not to omit one moment from the golden store. Wash us in the sprinkled blood, the all-cleansing blood, the precious blood, the blood of Christ as of a Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world, for by this blood only can we have release from guilt, its torment, its memory, and its perdition. Amen.

2 Chronicles xxxiv.

KING JOSIAH.

WE have been accustomed to the play of light and shade in these historic studies; we have had a good deal of shade in the last two reigns. Now comes light. Josiah was next made king.

"And he reigned in Jerusalem one and thirty years" (v. 1).

What encouragement had he to do that which was right in the sight of the Lord? Not a whit from his father. How could such a father have such a son? The answer is in history, not in speculation. It is a miracle. We cannot get rid of the real miracles of life. We may have speculation concerning signs and tokens and wonders in the heavens above and in the earth beneath, and we may come to a fine frenzy of doubt as to the miracles wrought according to the narration in the New Testament; but here are miracles on our own hearthstone; here are signs and wonders within the narrow heavens of our own household; here is history producing its concrete miracle. Josiah was the son of Amon—which is equal to saying that the greatest sinner of his day was the progenitor of one of the finest saints that ever prayed. If that is not a miracle, what is meant by the term miracle? Read the account and say if it be not the reading of music:—

"And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the ways of David his father, and declined neither to the right hand, nor to the left" (v. 2).

Then he had more fathers than one. That is the explanation. You are not the son of the man that went immediately before you; you are his son only in a very incidental manner. Josiah was the son of "David his father,"—the larger father, the deeper root, the elect of God; a sun fouled by many a black spot, but a shining orb notwithstanding.

We must enlarge our view if we would come to right conclusions regarding many mysteries. Amon was but a link in the chain. The bad man here, or the good man there, taken in his solitariness, is but a comparatively trivial incident in life's tragedy. Heredity is not from one to two; it is from one to the last; from the beginning to the ending. In every man there lives all the humanity that ever lived. We are fearfully and wonderfully made—not physically only, but morally, religiously, temperamentally. All the kings live in the last king or the reigning monarch. We are one humanity. Solidarity has its lessons as well as individuality. We know not which of our ancestors comes up in us at this moment or that—now the tiger, now the eagle; now the praying mother, now the daring sire; now some mean soul

that got into the current by a mystery never to be explained; now the cunning, watchful, patient deceiver, who can wait for nights at a time and never complain of the dark or the cold; and now the hero that never had a fear; the philanthropist that loved the world; the mother that never looked otherwise than God himself would have her look. We can never tell which of our ancestors is really thinking in us, speaking through us; we cannot tell the accent of the immediate consciousness;—these are mysteries, and when the judgment comes it will be based upon all the ground, and not upon incidental points here and there, which by their very solitariness may be easily misjudged. Blessed be God for some men who take us back into ancient history. Josiah, like some other of the kings of Judah, is traced immediately, as it were, to David. There are men who seem to come up from centuries: how quaint they are! what unique views they take of life, education, discipline, and destiny! how curiously, with what a sub-consciousness, they think and pray and work! They are mysteries, they are called eccentricities, they are never denominated commonplaces; they speak in the nineteenth century the language of four thousand years ago; and let the news of the day be what it may, when they relate it it has about it all the flavour of an Old Testament story. We cannot tell, let us repeat, who may be uppermost in us at any particular moment.

Beautiful is the picture of Josiah's reign—

"While he was yet young he began to seek after the God of David his father" (v. 3).

What are these home instincts? What are these filial inspirations? What is this mysterious spirit of groping that is in some men? They move as if they were blind, yet as if they saw with their finger tips, for they seem to know in what direction to move; they say, The right God is not here; it is another God we want—larger, the living and true God; all these wooden images, all these carved figures, have no look of recognition in their faces; there is no "speculation in their eyes," there is no flush of blood-colour in their cheeks; it is another God—O that we knew where we might find him! Put the two pictures together: Amon was young, Josiah was younger still in

years; the one was trespassing more and more, and the other whilst yet young "began to seek." Sweet words are these!—to "begin"; not only to begin, but to "begin to seek." What suggestions of modesty, lowliness, and insignificance of effort! What determination expressed in simple patience! There is no violence, no demonstrativeness, nothing of the nature of ostentation, but inquiry, waiting, expectancy, a look at the heavens that has a moral telescope to aid its searching; a look that means: I know not from what part of the heavens the Lord God may come, but from some point he will presently descend, and it is for me to be seeking after him, to be prepared to receive him, come whence he may. We can surely begin to seek God; we can at least ask very serious questions; we can at least express dissatisfaction with the gods that are ruling the modern age; we must never rest until we have seen, in the highest sense of vision, the God of eternity. Let "David" here stand, not for a mere personality, but as a sign, pointing to a still remoter antiquity, and that antiquity referring us to eternity itself. Beware of the gods of speculation, the little idols of conjecture, invented gods, dressed and decorated for a plain sum in the current money of the day. The God whom we worship must come up from eternity, and must absorb the present time and glorify it by his condescension. There will be mystery. Certainly there will be mystery, and mystery is no small part of true religion. Mystery may be a cloud in which things are done which could not be done in the glare of white light. It is impossible to have religion without mystery, and without mystery it is impossible to have any great life. We are so made that we must look up. The constitution of man is such that merely looking round does not satisfy him. Call it an ambition, if you are afraid of real names. Yet there it is—a spirit that makes man look up and mutely ask questions of the highest point he can see. Does the ox gaze upon the stars? Does the beast of the field look for the whitening of the east, and revel when the sun sinks on his couch of glory like a dying king? What is this in man that says, There is something more than we see: the dawn is but the indication of a dawn behind it; what is seen is but a door, not yet open, covering that which is unseen and eternal? Along this line of inquiry let us find encouragement, illumination, comfort, hope.

In the time of Josiah a great discovery was made. When the house of the Lord was being repaired, a great prize was found: "Hilkiah * the priest found a book" (v. 14). That is the greatest finding in all history, so far as the education of the race is concerned. He found a book: what book was it? "A book of the law of the Lord given by Moses." Hilkiah communicated with Shaphan the scribe, and said, "I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord. And Hilkiah delivered the book to Shaphan. And Shaphan carried the book to the king, and brought the king word back again," and when the law was read by Huldah the prophetess, she uttered words that made the king and the people pale. There was judgment yet to be poured

* Of the seven persons bearing the name of Hilkiah in the Bible, the most important is the high-priest in the reign of Joash (2 Kings xxii. 4, *seq.*; 2 Chron. xxxiv. 9, *seq.*). He was the son of Shallum (1 Chron. vi. 13); and Ezra, the scribe, was his great-grandson (Ezra vii. 1). He took a prominent part in the reforms effected by King Josiah, and is especially remarkable for the discovery which he made in the house of the Lord of a book which is called "The Book of the Law" (2 Kings xxii. 8), and "The Book of the Covenant" (xxiii. 2). That this was some well-known book is evident from the form of the expression; but as to what it was opinions are divided. That it was the writing of Moses is expressly stated (2 Chron. xxxiv. 14); that it was the entire Pentateuch is the opinion of Josephus, Von Lengerke, Keil, Ewald, Hävernick, etc.; but others think it was only part of that collection, and others, that it was simply a collection of laws and ordinances appointed by Moses, such as are given in the Pentateuch, and especially in Deuteronomy. The objection to its being the whole Pentateuch is the improbability of that being read in the audience of the people at one time, as was this book (xxiii. 2); and there are many circumstances which render it probable that what was read to the people was the book of Deuteronomy, as, *ex. gr.*, the apparent allusion to Deut. xxix. 1 and xxx. 2 in ch. xxiii. 2, 3, and the special effect which the reading of the book had on the king, who did, in consequence, just what one impressed by such passages as occur in Deut. xvi. 18, etc., would be likely to do. At the same time, even if we admit that the part actually read consisted only of the summary of laws and institutions in Deuteronomy, it will not follow that that was the only part of the Pentateuch found by Hilkiah; for as the matter brought before his mind by Huldah, the prophetess (2 Kings xxii. 15, *seq.*), respected the restoration of the worship of Jehovah, it might be only to what bore on that that the reading specially referred. The probability is that the book found by Hilkiah was the same which was entrusted to the care of the priests, and was to be put in the side of the ark (Deut. xxxi. 9-26); and that this was the entire body of the Mosaic writing, and not any part of it, seems the only tenable conclusion (Hengstenberg, *Beiträge*, ii. 159, *seq.*).

out; wrath had only been slumbering, and it was to express itself upon all the people. But Josiah was to be saved from the storm. Said that motherly voice: "Because thine heart was tender, and thou didst humble thyself before God, when thou heardest his words against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, and humbledst thyself before me, and didst rend thy clothes, and weep before me; I have even heard thee also, saith the Lord. Behold, I will gather thee to thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered to thy grave in peace, neither shall thine eyes see all the evil that I will bring upon this place, and upon the inhabitants of the same. So they brought the king word again."

"And the king stood in his place, and made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord, and to keep his commandments, and his testimonies, and his statutes, with all his heart, and with all his soul. . . . And he caused all that were present in Jerusalem and Benjamin to stand to it" (vv. 31, 32).

There must be times of consecration; there must be solemn hours in life in which the universal consciousness is touched with a sense of penitence and obligation, and when the whole people pray, in silence if not in speech. This is always the result of finding the "book of the law of the Lord." There are different ways of finding that book; we come upon it in Nature; we see it page by page in Providence; we read some of its more solemn lessons in penalties, in issues that indicate that life is watched and not unwatched; that life will be judged and not allowed to go for want of criticism; we find it in a written form in what is called the Bible, *the* Book; a most wondrous composition, written by men who never saw one another, written in different ages of the world's history, written in different languages, yet with a marvellous consensus of moral opinion and moral demand; verily a book of righteousness, hating all sin, never hesitating to dig hell for unrepented guilt. We have not to invent a Bible; we have not to invent a morality; we are not called upon to refer to one another, saying deferentially, What is your view of moral goodness moral purity, social righteousness? Blessed be God, no man is consulted about this; it is ours to obey. Practice soon goes wrong when there is no spiritual revelation. Let the Bible be withdrawn from society, and morality will soon withdraw along

with it. Morality will then become a subject of speculation and controversy, and will be so cobwebbed by different opinions and contradictory criticisms, that men will say, Seeing there is so much discussion about what is right and what is wrong, let us do what is good in our own eyes.

We need the Book—stern, definite, authoritative book—saying, "Thou shalt—thou shalt not." Spiritual revelation can only be rightly interpreted by spiritual minds. That is the priestly authority which we need—namely, spirituality, moral sympathy. The man whose heart is purest will read the Bible with the most perfect comprehension of its meaning, and in the long run he will be the reigning critic. The time will come when letters will be divine as to their presence, when literary criticism will be valued at its proper price, and set down in its proper sphere, a very high and important sphere; but the time will also come when he will be pre-eminently consulted who has the genius of a pure heart; who has the inspiration of grace; who, mayhap not knowing so much as many others about the letter, can see the meaning, feel it, touch it, take it out, and show it; and all men shall say when looking upon it, This is none other than the beauty of the Lord; this is the very vision of God. When we find the book of the law, let us not shrink from finding its judgments as well as its gospels. The prophecies must all be fulfilled, when they indicate that the wicked shall be destroyed: shall be driven away in the wrath of God. The Bible is not all gospel; or where it is all gospel it involves the element of judgment and the certainty of doom. It is all gospel in that it never allows one good man to die, to perish, to be punished. It searches, criticises, distinguishes, discriminates, takes away the jewel from the common pebble, and loses nothing, and allows nothing to be lost but "the son of perdition," and when he sinks into his destiny there is no soul but says Amen.

2 Chronicles xxxv. 1., 18.

"Josiah [2 Kings xxiii. 21, 22] kept a passover unto the Lord in Jerusalem: and they killed the passover on the fourteenth day of the first month. [Not at an irregular time like Hezekiah (chap. xxx. 2), but on the day appointed by the law (Exod. xii. 6)].

"And there was no passover like to that kept in Israel from the days of Samuel the prophet; neither did all the kings of Israel keep such a passover as Josiah kept, and the priests, and the Levites, and all Judah and Israel that were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem." [The chronicler agrees with the writer of Kings that there had been no *such* passover since the days of the last judge, Samuel. Its superiority to other passovers seems to have consisted—(1) in the multitudes that attended it; and (2) in the completeness with which all the directions of the law were observed in its celebration. Comp. Nehem. viii. 17.—*The Speaker's Commentary.*]

A SOLEMN PASSOVER.

HOW one religious exercise gathers around itself the memory of all others! one day may be the keystone in a bridge of days. There was no such passover, no such holy excitement, divine and ennobling enthusiasm, no such conscious unity of heart and consent of will and sacrifice of soul, no such supremacy of joy. What does history say about this matter? The testimony of history is that the divinest enjoyments are associated with religion. Analyse the emotion as we may, it is in the excitement of true religious feeling that the highest, deepest, truest joys of men have ever been found. How then can such joy, even religious gladness, be enhanced? Only by an action from within itself. We can add nothing to religious excitement that is intelligent and noble. But we can develop such excitement from passion to passion, from enlargement to enlargement, until the whole heaven seems to be filled with its glory, and all the heart to be inspired by its music. We need occasional days in religious history. We cannot have a continual revival, for then the unusual would become the familiar. We cannot carry miracles beyond a certain number, because they would cease to

be miracles and fall into commonplaces. Wealth itself cannot, for effective purposes, be carried beyond a given quantity until it becomes poverty, and no man is so poor as the poor millionaire. We need occasional revival, excitement, enthusiasm of sensation, leading to completeness of sacrifice. We could not hear some preachers always, because we cannot live on their level, or abide in the tabernacle of their imagining and their prayer. It is well to hear them now and again, they create epochs in our memories. They make us forget the past except for purposes of comparison. We cannot always live in the highest prayer; for days together we must hardly pray at all, except in our readiness to pray; we cannot enter into the passion of intercession; we sink into the repose of gracious willingness to see the Lord when it pleases him to reveal himself; but we are not to consider that such repose is indolence or spiritual desuetude, involving the criminality of conscious neglect.

Herein is a law of nature, an operation of the soul familiar to us in the higher education, and in the higher excitements of commercial, political, and literary life. But the occasional passover, how memorable, how tender, how good to recall! What an inspiration to revive in the soul. Pity the man whose calendar is all written alike, who has no red-letter days of the heart, no memory of prayer that thrills him with unutterable joy. You remember the early struggle with sin and the devil, and how by the grace of God you were enabled to fling the monster to the ground and stand upon him in sign of victory? Never let that writing in the record fade out. You remember the first glimpse of God in prayer? You prayed on with difficulty, words seemed to come hesitantly to your use, as if they were partly afraid of you: but you persevered, and from sentence you passed to sentence, until the whole soul glowed with a new delight; and for the moment—for men can only be conscious of God for one moment—for the moment heaven was opened, and you by the cross of Christ had right of entry. Never forget that day. When temptation thickens upon you, and the devil's hand is on your throat, remember that blessed passover, and the memory of it shall be a protection, a benediction, and an inspiration. Comfort one another with these words.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, it is our joy to know that all things are in thy hand, and not in ours. The Lord reigneth, and no other god—thy throne is in the heavens, and thy dominion ruleth over all. The very hairs of our head are all numbered, our steps are known; our downsitting and our uprising, our outgoing and our incoming, are all observed. There is not a word upon our tongue, there is not a thought in our heart, but, lo, O Lord, it is known altogether, for all things are naked and open unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do. But thine is a kind eye, a tender look, a heart of pity; truly thy mercy endureth for ever. When our father's pity fails, and there is no more love in our mother's heart, thy mercy, so abundant, seems but to begin to be, for there is no measure thereof, and no line can be laid upon it, and no man hath found the shore of that great sea. We ourselves know these things, for we live in thy mercy. It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed. If thy pity were less, our life would be shorter —it is because thy compassions fail not that our days run on; we live and move and have our being in thine unwasting love. We bless thee that we know these things: once we did not know them; we were gods unto ourselves, and our hearts turned in upon their own resources and found a sanctuary in their own ignorance and feebleness. But now our house is built upon the rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. We have found the Living One, the strong Lord, the God of hosts, the Creator of the ends of the earth. In thine omnipotence we find our defence, in thy wisdom we find our judgment—behold thou art unto us as an infinite pavilion, giving us security by night and day; and thou art a great sun, in whose rays we find our morning and our summer. For all these convictions, hopes, delights, and unspeakable satisfactions we magnify the Lord. We are no more kept away from him, we have been taken up into the Lord's chariot, and neither hill nor sea shall keep us from him. We bless thee for all the mercies of the week—seven days of compassion, pity, care, watchfulness, pardon, love. We would gather up all our memories into one adoring psalm and thankful hymn, and with one voice and one heart praise the Lord for his wonderful works. We come before thee to find rest, for we are weary: we return to replenish our strength, for our power has gone out of us. O Living Fountain, Eternal Spring, River that is full of water, to thee we come, and our thirst is swallowed up as a spark in the sea. We believe that thou dost give unto thy people peace, rest, joy, renewal of strength: thou dost recall their tenderest memories, thou dost cause their recollection to become as prophecies of the future: from all their history thou art drawing new revelations of thine own power, wisdom, and graciousness, and

because our yesterdays have glowed with so warm a heat, and have been brilliant with so intense a light, we will not fear the coming morrow—we put ourselves into thy hands, we will go whither thou dost lead. Jesus, be our Guide. Help us to believe that all things work together for good to them that love thee. Enable us to believe that everything in the universe is in thy care. Thou numberest the drops of the dew of the morning, and there is no cloud that falleth in tender showers upon the earth that is not reckoned up in thy host of riches. All things are thine, and we are thy creatures, made in thine image, capable of ascertaining and obeying thy will. Help us to make it our only delight to find out the law and the will of heaven, and to do this with a glad heart and an industrious hand. We have many wants, but thou knowest every interest which we represent: we have much sin, but there is much blood: great guilt, but there is a greater cross. Where sin abounded grace hath much more abounded—it is then to that abounding and redundant grace that we now come, that our sin, poverty, weakness, may be destroyed and forgotten because of the infinite love of God. Take our life into thy charge—shape it into thine own forms, inspire it with thine own meaning; lead it to the accomplishment of thy purpose, up the steep hill, down in the dark and tortuous vale, through the Jordan, over the Red Sea, through the wilderness—anywhere, everywhere; choose the way and keep our choice back from us—only let us follow thee willingly, joyously, with indestructible hopefulness of spirit, knowing that nothing can happen that is not caught within the sweep of thy great plan, that all things fall into the scheme of thy wisdom, are overruled, directed, and sanctified by an immutable and invincible power. Regard thy servants who try to pray—whose prayer trembles upon their lips as if unable to get away to heaven—a poor, broken-winged bird that can hardly flutter. O help their infirmities, and be the minister of their prayers. Help them in their confessions and lamentations, in their desire for wider knowledge, for clearer insight into truth—give them all the blessings needed to redeem, purify, enlarge, and glorify the life upon which they have entered. Let there be great answering of prayer to-day; yea, let the answers of the Lord overflow the house—then shall we truly know that we have been praying in the name of the Lamb of God, Saviour of the world, Priest of the universe, our Lord Christ Jesus. Amen.

2 Chronicles xxxv. 21.

"Forbear thee from meddling with God, who is with me, that he destroy thee not."

MEDDLING WITH GOD.

JOSIAH was an excellent king of Judah.* There had been none like him for many a long day. He was but an infant when he came unto the throne, that is to say, he was eight years old. The written law had been lost a very long time;

* *Ante*, page 101.

Josiah had nothing by way of example to draw upon that could lift him up towards the true notion of worship and service to the real God. Being so young, what could he do? He found something in his own heart, as we should humanly say, that started him on the right direction. He began in a very wonderful way to do very excellent things. He seemed to be a kind of instinctive or intuitional reformer, for the law was lost, and the priests and prophets seemed to be dumb, and the poor young king wrought away with such light as he had, and in the course of his working he did what we may do if we try—he found the law. We should find more if we sought for more: he that doeth the will shall know the doctrine: he who uses the little candle that is at his disposal shall be led out into solar light—twilight to begin with, but growing unceasingly and unchangeably up into the mid-day blaze of glory.

Josiah then found the law, had it read in his hearing, learned from it that every king of Judah and of Israel had been covenanted to keep that law with his own hand, and he felt that all the judgments prophesied against the house of Israel and of Judah would fall upon his own head, because he had not obeyed the letter of the word of the Lord. What was to be done? It was speedily discovered that the wardrobe-keeper had a wife in whom was the spirit of prophecy, and so to Huldah they went, and she sent comfortable messages to the young king. She said: Thus saith the Lord to the man who hath acted so, Because thine heart was tender, and thou hast feared the Lord, none of these judgments shall fall upon thee, but thou shalt be gathered to thy fathers in peace, and after that there shall come a black day upon the black people. So Josiah took heart again, and it came into his mind to revive the old ceremonies and ritual of Israel, and to do wonderful things in the way of the passover, and we read that there was no passover like to that kept in Israel from the days of Samuel the prophet.

Now Josiah will go down to his fathers in peace—if he behave himself. He reigned one and thirty years, and in the last month of that last year he may be tripped up. We are not safe while we are on the water, though there may be but eighteen inches

between the ship and the land; there is room enough in eighteen inches to sink down. Let us get on to the land before we sing—be on the rock before we take the trumpet and put it to our lips: risk nothing of the detail of life—an iota may ruin us, the miss of the smallest writing in all the minutest detail may lead to loss, to death, to hell. Man is not saved by lumps of good behaviour, by breadths of possible morality: he that is unfaithful in the least will be unfaithful in the greatest. Even yet Josiah may be smitten from heaven after his one and thirty years of very excellent service—so many people get wrong just at the last, so many people fall into the water just as they are stepping on land. What I say unto one, I say unto all—Watch.

The miscarriage in the case of Josiah came about in this way. There was a king of Egypt called Pharaoh Necho, an old foe of the Assyrian empire. He came up to fight against Charchemish, by Euphrates, and Josiah at his own instigation went out against Necho king of Egypt. But Necho king of Egypt sent ambassadors to him, saying, "What have I to do with thee, thou king of Judah? I come not against thee this day, but against the house wherewith I have war: for God commanded me to make haste: forbear thee from meddling with God, who is with me, that he destroy thee not." A noble message—the man who can speak so calmly, solemnly, religiously, will fight well. Have no faith in the blustering assailant—dread the man who challenges thee when on his knees.

Josiah would not turn his face from Necho, but disguised himself that he might fight with him; he hearkened not unto the words of Necho from the mouth of God, and came to fight in the valley of Megiddo. And the archers shot at King Josiah, and the king said to his servants, "Have me away, for I am sore wounded." So he was put into his second chariot, and carried home. And he died, and was buried in one of the sepulchres of his fathers—he who might have been gathered to his fathers quietly, in the very peace, in the infinite sweetness of the benediction of God, was shot like a dog.

Does any man pride himself upon a quarter of a century's good behaviour? If there is a day yet left to him, that is time enough

to sponge out all the beauty of the past and to find his way into perdition. The question most deeply interesting is, What can we learn from the words of the king of Egypt that will help us to live a true and useful life?

Do we not learn from Necho—unfamiliar name, unaccustomed minister—that our life is not a series of unrelated accidents, but that it is part of a divine and immutable scheme? The king of Egypt said in effect to Josiah: "This is no doing of mine; I am secondary in the matter; I am not following the lure of my own fancy; I am impelled by God; I am here as his servant—treat me as such, or God will cause his judgment to fall upon thee." This is the only solid ground to occupy, if life is to be more than a continual exasperation and a bitter disappointment. This is the great doctrine of Providence which Jesus Christ never ceased to teach, and never ceased to live. When he began his life, what did he say? O to catch the first words from those eloquent lips!—what was the first note in the anthem of that tragic life? "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" What was the last note in that same anthem? Will he be able to make his way round, so as to finish where he began? Hear him on the cross: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." Father at first, Father at last, and throughout all the teaching the same word glowed like a sun that kept all the inferior stars in their places.

Have you been centring in yourself, beginning with your own little individuality, carving out a small system of astronomy with your own shadow as a centre? Then wonder not that your faces are wrinkled, and that there is a murmur in your speech, a cloud in your sky, and that you are lost amid all the little, petty, fretful, vexatious details of life. You are wrong. We are invited in Holy Scripture to believe that we are not our own creators; that we live because God wills it; that the very hairs of our head are all numbered; that our steps are of the Lord's ordering, and that our downsitting and our uprising are noted in heaven; that our outgoing is observed, and our returning regarded in the heavenly books, and at the last our deeds and words will be judged by the wise God, whose strength and

wisdom are the stay of the universe. If you accept that faith you cannot be troubled; if you have any other creed, the weather, the climate, will have you up and down according to the fickleness of its own movement.

The doctrine of the Bible is a doctrine of a providential plan—a divine scheme. Every page is rich with the promises of this doctrine, not a line is out of chord with its solemn music. Yea, the cross itself is part of the infinite plan foreseen from eternity in every shadow of its gloom and every pang of its agony. So, then, we believe that God is over all, that the earth is in the hollow of his hand, and that nothing happens, even down to the falling out of its nest of the youngest sparrow in the early summer, without his notice. A grand conception, if it be nothing more—a marvellous poem if only a flash of fancy—an infinite rock if a divine revelation. And yet there are people round about us who pray to God but don't trust him. What wonder that their prayers, like birds with broken wings, die on the threshold of the closet in which they were conceived?

The great doctrine of divine providence is like the sun, distant, inaccessible; but the exemplification of that doctrine in personal and practical life is like the light which falls out of the sun, which makes morning upon our window and the abundant summer round about our houses. Let us therefore, turning from the great general doctrine which underlies the message which the king of Egypt addressed to Josiah, look at some of the minute and special colourings of this doctrine which come to us through its personal trials and realisations.

I. In the first place the king of Egypt considered that the doctrine of a providential plan was not inconsistent with difficulty, contention, loss, and suffering on the part of man. Does the king of Egypt say: "This is Providence, brother king Josiah, sitting on my throne, my head upon a pillow of down, my feet resting on velvet soft as moss, my whole house glowing with every light and every beauty"? No such foolish message does he send to the king of Judah. Necho has come up from his own land, come up to suffer, come up to fight, come up to shed blood: yet he says, "God sent me." It is so seldom we think God sends

us to church on a wet Sunday: we think he is so fearful of our taking cold that surely he would never be so unreasonable as to ask us to go out in wet weather. In the old, old times, when heroes shook the earth with their majestic step, they were not afraid of insects and wet days—we are.

". . . . 't is true: 't is true, 't is pity;
And pity 't is, 't is true."

It was no holiday dream that had touched Necho's ambition or vanity: it was a service of severe discipline, anxious preparation, daily watching, mortal strife, and yet he saw God over it all, watching, directing, controlling. There are some who believe in providence when they are in a nice large boat and have the best seat, and when the water is like molten silver, and the banks are near and green, and the sky far off and blue, with many a keen light lodging in its fleecy clouds. Then they say, "Ah, after all he must be blind who does not see God in this." How sad to hear such talk! But to hear a poor woman—a widow—who has buried the one boy in the family that could work for its sustenance—to hear her say, looking at all the little girls who are nearly helpless, taking up the corner of her apron to wipe off the tear from her poor eyes—"God's will be done: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away—blessed be the name of the Lord"—that should convert us, bring us home, make us pray.

O full summer Christian, what art thou doing to bring lustre upon thy faith, to make the world wonder if it does not worship, stand aghast and amazed if it do not join thy psalm of resignation? If Christians carried out their creed, we should soon, by the blessing of God, convert the heathen.

II. In the next place the king of Egypt acknowledged and proclaimed the tender and ever-comforting doctrine of a special, personal, detailed Providence. Did he say to Josiah, "The Lord reigneth"? No. Did he refer Josiah to great abstract principles? He did not. What said Necho—man of the strange mouth and the unfamiliar voice? He said, "God commanded me, God is with me." There is a deism which says that the whole is cared

for, but the part must take care of itself. The king of Egypt reversed the doctrine, saw God caring for the part, and reasoned that therefore he cared for the whole. This is the very teaching of Christ: Christ has some strange ministers, some irregular expositors, some preachers who do not come through the orthodox gate, and therefore much to be suspected by people who are cradled in orthodoxy and will be buried in it. Jesus Christ and Necho king of Egypt were at one in this high, sweet note. Jesus said, "Wherefore,"—after having looked at bird and lily, and small things accessible to the people generally,—"Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to-morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?" If we believed that, the remainder of our lives would be happy.

God will take care of thee, O man, if thou dost live in him and for him, and dost love him. He will not let thy grey hairs go down with sorrow to the grave, and he will find the key of that shut door, and he will search for a rod the shadow of which shall make the Red Sea sever in two parts, and thou shalt go through on dry land. Have faith in God—cast thyself upon him and wait patiently his will and the revelation of his purpose, and if thou must perish, perish with thy belief upon thy lips. No man was ever wounded to death by that dart.

God cares for the individual, for the unit. Do you care for your family as an abstraction or as a reality? Do you care for your children as a whole or do you care for them individually? If you lump them, speak of them as a poetical abstraction, who would wish to be under your patronage? But if you pick out the eldest, and the youngest, and the three or four or five between, and care for each of them as if that were the only child, then it would be well to be one of the number. And so you do. Very well: "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him"—give the Holy Ghost to them that seek him—give direction to every one of his children? Why, if one of them went astray, what would he do? He would leave the ninety and nine and would go after that

which was gone astray. The God that gave that representation of himself is all the God we want. The tenderness of that suggestion shall stand for learning, for criticism, for history, for logic—it shall be all in all.

By constantly desiring to know and to do the will of God, we seem to link our small life to the great chariot of God's providence; but when we take our life into our own keeping, we detach ourselves from that chariot and grope like cripples in the dark. By our faith we draw succour from the very root of God's own being, but by our unbelief and self-sufficiency we lose the sustenance, and perish because we seek not to live on God's word but on our own. To-day there are some people who imagine that they can get along pretty well without God: who are the people? Debtors to his mercy. Who are the people that have wounded you most keenly? The people to whom you have been most kind. Nobody else can thrust the knife so far into the heart. Barbarian and Scythian can give you an ugly thrust that shall tear the skin, but man of your own household, child of your own bones, friend that has sucked the blood of your love—he can thrust the blade up to the hilt.

When a man has been born in a Christian land, has been reared in a Christian atmosphere, and has had all the advantages of a Christian example and Christian training, it is impossible for that man to know exactly what he would have been and what he would have done but for those facts. Standing in a railway station, we once saw something which graphically illustrates this point. There came a carriage, all by itself—no steam engine, just a carriage and nothing more. And the carriage said, "There is a notion abroad, an old-fashioned but mistaken and sometimes mischievous notion, that it is needful to have a steam-engine in order to draw a carriage. Gentlemen," continued the carriage, looking to the few persons on the platform, "if you seek an argument to disprove that fallacy, *circumspice*, look around." And we all looked around, and we all saw it, and we all said, "Carriage, this is very wonderful: you brought yourself into this station apparently, now take yourself out of it." And the carriage is standing there still, and may stand there till it

rots—it cannot turn a wheel. It was a detached carriage; the great engine that brought it along with mighty sweep went on, and this was left behind to spend its momentum, and it just came into the station so nicely and thought it had brought itself in. And there be many human detached carriages. They have had fathers, mothers, ministers, schools, lectures, books; they have been brought up under Christian culture, taken so far along the line: by some means or other become detached—asked to be detached, and in spending their dying momentum they think they are using an original force. Be it mine to be drawn on by the great God: I would live and move and have my being in God; my smallest affairs I would spread before him; I would ask him to my bed-chamber that he may give me sleep; I would see him at my table as the Giver and Sanctifier of my daily bread. He shall keep my door lest an enemy enter or a friend go out—when I pass through the valley of the shadow of death I will ask no other comfort than his rod and staff.

"Forbear thee from meddling with God." It is very notable that we should have this great saying from the mouth of a king of Egypt.* This would have come well from the lips of Jeremiah, who prophesied in the days of Josiah king of Judah. It would have befitted the burning lips of Ezekiel; it would have fallen well from the eloquent mouth of Isaiah. But we get this doctrine from Necho king of Egypt. This is indeed water in an unexpected place—behold, a fair flower in a wide, bleak desert: hear the music of heaven played upon a strange instrument.

* These are remarkable words in the mouth of a heathen; but they are not without a parallel in the remains of ancient Egypt that have come down to us. Piankhi, for instance, king of Egypt about B.C. 750, says, in an inscription which has been translated by the Rev. Canon Cook: "Didst thou not know that the divine shade was over me? I have not acted without his knowledge; he commanded my acts" (ll. 67–69). It would seem, therefore, that the Egyptian kings, in a certain sense, acknowledged a single supreme God, and considered their actions to be inspired by him. Thus the explanations, that Necho referred to a prophecy of Jeremiah's, whereof he had heard (Apoc. Esd. i. 26), and used the word "Elohim" as the proper name of the God of the Jews; or that he alluded to some oracle which he had received—perhaps one from Branchidæ (see Herod. ii. 158)—are unnecessary. He merely expressed himself as Egyptian kings were in the habit of doing.—*The Speaker's Commentary.*

Do you think it cannot be true because Necho the heathenish king of Egypt said that? Then you know not that it is part of the divine plan to bring strange prophets into the ministry of the word. Were there not ten lepers cleansed? Yes. How many returned to give glory to God? One. Who was he? A stranger. Did not one man stoop to pity the wounded traveller on the road, to pour in wine and oil, to set him on his beast, to bring him to an inn, and to take care of him? Yes. Who was that? A Samaritan. Was there not a woman who surprised the Son of God himself by the abundance and vividness of her faith—did she not seem to turn back the going of the Eternal? She did. Who was she? A woman, a Syro-Phœnician, no well-dressed Jewess who was caught within the cordon of the old covenants, and seemed to have an hereditary right to the divine ministrations and privileges. Was there not a man who once said, preaching the gospel before the time, "It is expedient that one man die for the people"? Yes. Who was it—Peter? No. John? No. Who? Caiaphas. Certainly, it is God's way. If we hold our peace he will make the stones cry out. If we English Christians, stall-fed—if we hold our peace, he will make the stones cry out. If we who swallow three sermons a week, and would kill the finest preacher that ever breathed by drawing from him and never giving anything in return, if we hold our peace, He will make the stones cry out. If we who know about Nazareth, and Bethlehem, and Capernaum, and Jerusalem, and Golgotha, and Bethany, if we who have seen the blood and felt the hot healing drops fall upon our guilt—if we are dumb, the heathen shall take our places and we shall be shut out.

EZRA.

THE Aaronic descent of Ezra is undoubted. In Scripture he is stated to be the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, and the line goes back to Phinehas, the son of Aaron. We have repeatedly pointed out that in the Bible the word "son" is not to be too literally interpreted, for it sometimes includes the relation of grandson, and relations still more remote. On the official life of Ezra, Josephus gives some useful particulars. From the Bible we learn that Ezra was "a scribe," "a ready scribe of the law of Moses," "a scribe of the words of the commandments of the Lord and of his statutes to Israel," "a scribe of the law of the God of heaven"; and not only a scribe but "a priest"—a fact which must be duly noted in reading the work which bears his name. Josephus says that Ezra was high priest of the Jews that were left in Babylon, and particularly conversant with the laws of Moses. Not only was Ezra a man of great learning and of high official dignity, he was held in great esteem because of his personal character. Everywhere his word was credited, and his authority was acknowledged. The social Ezra was the equal of the official Ezra; the man was greater than the scribe. Implicit confidence was reposed in Ezra by Artaxerxes Longimanus and by the royal counsellors. National crises develop men—they may, indeed, be said to discover men. As necessity is proverbially the mother of invention, so national emergency brings to the front men who have for years been undergoing unconscious preparation for the exercise of profound and beneficent influence. Ezra was the custodian of the almost untold gold and silver which the king and his counsellors contributed or "freely offered

unto the God of Israel." Not only so, Ezra was empowered to collect what he could of silver and gold in Babylon, and to carry it along, with the freewill offerings of the people and the priests, for the building of the house of God at Jerusalem. Out of the sum-total of the treasure, Ezra was instructed and directed to lay out whatever he thought necessary for the fulfilment of the law and the maintenance of public worship. Still more, Ezra was empowered to buy vessels "for the house of God in Jerusalem;" and if these gifts and purchases were insufficient, Ezra was at liberty to take from the king's treasure-house whatever in his discretion he deemed needful. Still farther evidence of Ezra's great social status is found in the fact that Artaxerxes Longimanus issued a decree to the keepers of the king's treasure beyond the river to co-operate with Ezra in all things, and to supply him liberally with money, corn, wine, oil, and salt. And yet more, Ezra had authority to impose tribute upon any priest, Levite, or other religious or sacerdotal officer.

Here, then, it will be seen we are face to face with a man of affairs, a man of business, emphatically a statesman. It is often thought that in dealing with biblical characters we are dealing with a species of fanatics who had little or no experience of mundane affairs,—persons who might be sentimentally respected, but who could not be practically trusted. Let us read this history as if we were reading history that is denominated "profane," and let us in that sense be just to Ezra as a man of immense capacity and of statesmanlike perception of the need of his times. Here is the most trusted man of his day going forth upon a certain important errand, and therefore it must be interesting to students of history, viewed simply as such, to trace his course, to note his method of handling affairs, and to learn what may be useful from the practical side of his character. It is important to be able to establish the

truth that it is possible to be at once religious and practical. It would seem difficult for this or any other age to believe that a man can both pray and work; that a man can sing hymns and psalms and spiritual tunes, and yet, on the other hand, attend to the dry details of life. Ezra is going out upon a business expedition, and yet he is taking all his religion with him, for his religion was not an ornament or a decoration, a thing which he could take up and lay down at will; it was part of his very soul, it was the main line of what constituted his selfhood. Ezra, as we have said, was well versed in the law of Moses. One of the most interesting incidents in his career is to be found in his standing upon a pulpit or tower of wood, and reading out of the book of the law of Moses. It is further instructive to note that the account which is given by Josephus agrees with that of Nehemiah in all leading particulars, so that we are not dealing with an image of the fancy, a spectre created by some vivid imagination, but with a real and actual historical personage. According to the best authorities, Josephus is cited as stating that Ezra died soon after his appearance before the people as indicated in the Book of Nehemiah, an appearance which was made at the Feast of Tabernacles. It is on record that Ezra was buried at Jerusalem with great magnificence.

Kitto says that according to some Jewish chroniclers Ezra died in the year in which Alexander came to Jerusalem; in the same year, too, in which took place the death of the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi,—a period at which prophecy seems to have become extinct. There is another tradition, which relates that Ezra returned to Babylon, and died there at the age of one hundred and twenty years. With these uncertain matters we have nothing to do: here is the record of an active and energetic career, and we have now to peruse it with a view to spiritual edification.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, thou settest everything in order: the very hairs of our head are all numbered; there is not a word in our mouth, there is not a thought in our heart, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. We believe in the minuteness of thy care: we cannot understand it, but we feel how near thou art, and how thou dost take note of all we are and all we need, and how with a great hand of love thou dost give us what our life most sorely wants. We dare not think of this, for we could not explain it: enough that we feel it, that our heart answers it, that every day we put out our love to seek thee again, and say, We dare not walk without God, or go abroad without his light, or attempt to stand without his succour and benediction. Thus have we been trained, and we rejoice in the education: we cannot give it up; the heart goes out after thee, and will find thee, and will not rest until thou hast entered it, and given it all thine own peace. What is there that bears not the sign of thy hand? We cannot look around without seeing thee in thy works everywhere; thou hast written thy name on all things, great and small, enduring and frail; thou hast not hid thyself from any of thy works: behold, we see in them all the image and superscription of God. Jesus Christ thy Son was God manifest in the flesh. We have seen him and heard him speak; we have been near him —his companions, his students, his worshippers; we have wondered at the gracious words which have proceeded out of his mouth; we have said, Never man spake like this man: even when he used our own words he used them with a spirit all his own, and infused into them the mystery of almightiness, the pathos of eternity. May we study him more lovingly, profoundly, sympathetically; and may men take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus and have learned of him, not only because we repeat his words, but because we breathe his spirit, and are rich with his infinite charity. We bless thee for thy book; it is like none other: for thy house; it sanctifies all dwellings amidst which it stands: for the cross of Christ, that unites and glorifies all the universe which we know. Dwell with us: never leave us! Thou hast not built us up thus far that thou mightest throw us down into destruction: thy purpose runs out towards completion, and thou shalt yet see the finished temple of thine intention. Blessed Jesus, thou shalt see of the travail of thy soul, and shalt be satisfied; and when thou art satisfied thy whole creation will be blessed with unspeakable contentment. Amen.

EZRA.

Chapter 1.

1. Now [And] in the first year of Cyrus [in Babylon] king of Persia [Cyrus became king 559 B.C.], that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah [whose writings Daniel consulted] might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up [probably through the instrumentality of Daniel] the spirit of Cyrus [so named by God more than a hundred years before he was born (Isa. xliv. 28)] king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,

2. Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged [visited] me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

3. Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah [Jerusalem is partly in Judah and partly in Benjamin], and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (he is the God), which is in Jerusalem.

4. And whosoever remaineth [compare this with the beginning of Nehemiah] in any place where he sojourneth [as an exile], let the men of his place [the heathen was to help the Hebrew] help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

5. ¶ Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised [true inspiration], to go up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem.

6. And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things [metals], beside all that was willingly offered [the people, too, were stirred up].

7. ¶ Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods [Bel and Nebo];

8. Even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath [Mithra was the sun-god of the Persians] the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar [the Chaldee name of Zerubbabel], the prince of Judah.

9. And this is the number of them: thirty chargers of gold, a thousand chargers of silver, nine and twenty knives,

10. Thirty basons of gold, silver basons of a second sort [inferior quality] four hundred and ten, and other vessels a thousand.

11. All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand and four hundred. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up with them of the captivity that were brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem [vessels which had been desecrated at the feast of Belshazzar].

THE PROCLAMATION OF CYRUS.

WHAT have we to do with a history so ancient? Is there anything here for men of our century? Are not all these green and mouldy gravestones hardly worth deciphering? What if this chapter be quick with pulses which ought to express our own best life? What if this be in its substance and in its meaning the only chapter worth writing in the active life of the Church? Let us be careful where we step, for every place is holy ground, and life is lying thickly around us, and one rude or thoughtless step may crush some thing of beauty. Let us hold our peace in these ancient halls: the very stones will be eloquent in their silence, if we will be but quiet—if we will but listen. All old things have deep meanings. He is no student who seizes the present as if it were the only thing worthy of attention: the present is the past, with a new accent, some new phasis, some transient change. We are to-day what we were yesterday.

Here is a great mental awakening.

"The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia" (v. 1).

Why do we limit this mighty wind of God? Why do we say, It blew long centuries ago, but is not blowing now, either in great hurricane or in gentle breeze? We have supposed that inspiration has ceased. We now represent it by some kind of effigy, and we approach the effigy with a superstition which we sometimes mistake for veneration. If God lives, why should inspiration cease? There may be differences of method in defining inspiration, but as to its substantial meaning and happy uses inspiration must be continuous with the existence of God—must be the parallel line to the Divine duration. Has history nothing to say about these great winds from heaven? Suppose there were no Bible, are there not certain facts in history which can only be accounted for by some such theory as that of inspiration? Say, The gods—let us be polytheistic for a moment—excited the imagination of men. Even that would be a fact not to be sneered at, but to be

reckoned with in adding up the forces which have controlled and directed human history. There have been great awakenings in literature. Suddenly a nation has, so to say, sprung to its feet and said, Let us read! That is a mere matter of what is called profane history. Ages have passed in which men cared not to read, or write, or think; if there were any books to be opened, as a rule they lay untouched: but quite suddenly there has been what is termed a literary revival. Is such a thing possible? If it is possible to have a literary revival—that is, a revival of the love of learning, the love of reading, the love of writing—why may there not be such a thing as a religious revival, in which men shall say suddenly, but unanimously, Let us pray? And when men so moved so pray they shorten the distance between earth and heaven. It would be perhaps more difficult to believe in a religious revival if there had not been analogous revivals—revivals of learning, revivals of art. We have even ventured to apportion certain historical periods as periods of the "new birth" or new beginning in painting; so pictures take their date from this period or from that: critics can trace whole schools of art to such-and-such awakening, upstirring of the mind. So then it cannot be so romantic after all, that there should also have been spiritual awakening,—times when men saw heaven opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God. Why not sneer at the revival of learning? Why not question the revival of art? Why not say that artists have chosen long French names for the purpose of indicating certain supposed facts which are no facts after all? That would be a fine field for sneering, and for supercilious criticism, and for the display of general ignorance. The point to be observed is this, that, account for it as we may, there have been in history great mental awakenings, great spiritual movements, and when these have taken a religious turn they have been dignified and sanctified by the name of "revivals." There is nothing to be ashamed of in that word.

But how are we to judge inspiration? A man may suppose himself to be inspired; are we, therefore, to bow down to him at once and concede him a position of priority or influence? Nothing of the kind. Even inspiration is to be tested. The Bible asks only to be put to the proof. Noble book! chivalrous speaker!

saying always, Try me, test me, probe me, take nothing for granted; if I fail at any one vital point dismiss me as an empiric and an impostor. "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God." Inspiration is always to be judged by its results. We must hear what Cyrus says; we must read the proclamation for ourselves. There is a spirit in man which enables him to say Yes or No to certain bold propositions and theories. It does not always enable him by some intellectual miracle so to analyse them as utterly to disprove them, abolish them, or drive them away as in a tempest of derision; but there is a spirit in man which says, Although I am short of words, although I cannot explain why, yet I know that this proposition, or that, is not true. That is what is termed the verifying faculty—the great power with which God has entrusted men. "The ear trieth words, as the mouth tasteth meat," and the mind trieth propositions, statements, so-called gospels. The soul of man is the great arbiter. We need not, therefore, bow down before every man or woman who claims inspiration. We listen respectfully to the claim, and say, What does it amount to? what end would you accomplish? to what purpose does this inspiration you claim point? and if in answer there should come replies indicative of reform, progress, purification, liberation, enlargement, beneficence, verily the answer will prove the inspiration that is claimed. No man is inspired who wishes to do evil. Disclaim and repudiate, not with sorrow but with indignation, the inspiration that would seek to curtail liberty, arrest progress, hinder the mission of philanthropy,—that would overload the weak, still further impoverish the poor, and shut off from the meanest dwelling any beam of daylight.

We may pray for great mental awakenings; we must not hasten them. We cannot organise inspiration; we cannot make mechanical arrangements for the getting-up of enthusiasm; but this we can do—we can keep ourselves from sneering at an enthusiasm we do not understand; we can occupy the dignified position of saying, We wait results; we will watch the end: we will take note of the upshot of the whole thing, and if we see in it signs of beneficence we shall instantly embrace it, and say, This is the breath of God, the pentecostal wind, the very fire

of heaven's altar. People do respond to the right kind of inspiration.

Cyrus felt a great personal responsibility in this matter; he said—

"He hath charged me to build" (v. 2).

Man cannot be always doing nothing and yet be happy. There comes a time when rest is monotony, and monotony is weariness. Nor can man always be pursuing a destructive career; there is a time when the soldier lets his sword fall down, saying, It cannot be right to pursue age after age this work of destruction. What then is man to do? Destruction fails, rest cries out for change: what is the alternative?—Construction, edification, putting things together and into shape, until they stand like a completed house ready for the occupation of God. We have had destruction enough, both in the Church and out of it; we have been fighting long enough over old theories, and foolish superstitions, and vain imaginings, and half-instructed criticisms; we may now have come upon a period when controversy may be set aside for instruction. What are we building? Some men never build; they do not give time enough to build; they fly a good deal; they move about with a rapidity which dazzles the eye which would follow them in all their rapid and eccentric movements: but they do not halt long enough at any given place to dig foundations, and lay great corner-stones, and rear solid edifices. This question can always be asked of every Cyrus and every inferior man, What is his record? Where has he spent his life? What has he done? At what targets has he been aiming? What plans has he been executing? Produce the record, and let us peruse it. There will come a time when this question will be forced, and every man will have to yield up an account of the deeds done in the body, whether they be good or whether they be evil. God is calling men to build,—not necessarily in wood and stone and iron, but to build character, life, utility. And this can be done everywhere. All men are not called to public building. What sweet homes some men have built! The moment you pass within the door you feel the genius of home welcoming and blessing you: the traveller says, I must tarry here; the hungering man says, There is bread within these walls; I know it though

I do not see it. What businesses some men are building, marked by high policy, reputable for known morality, uprightness, straightforwardness,—complicated businesses, yet every line palpitating with conscience. This kind of building is not always recognised as it should be; but it ought to be pointed out as a possibility to every man. We cannot all build upon the mountain-top, or in the great thoroughfares of the city, but we can build privately, quietly, secretly: we can build up broken hearts, we can be confirming feeble knees, we can be towers of strength to men who are enfeebled and impoverished. There are many such men, but they die too soon. Had we our way, how many men should we remove before we touched the princes of beneficence, the very leaders and monarchs of charity and philanthropy! But this is not in our hands. We are under the divine government, and it is for God to call his servants when he needs them, or when he sees they need rest. It should be ours not only to resign ourselves to inevitable losses, but to say, Who will occupy the vacant places? There is room now for men to come to the front; there are great gaps made in the very front line of public philanthropy and private charity. It is not enough to carve an urn and set it upon some pedestal, and write epitaphs eloquent with lamentation; the great answer to all such providences as remove the builders of society is to go forward, and offer in God's grace and strength to take their places and continue the uprearing and consolidation of the divine temple.

The people answered nobly. When Cyrus said, "Who is there among you?" the people answered and went forward of their own free will. All service is worthless if it is not voluntary. The loyalty of a nation cannot be judged by its taxation; the taxes may all have been paid, and yet the spirit may not be truly loyal. We cannot live in mere duty. It may be questioned whether that word is not narrowing and impoverishing a good many lives. You cannot discharge your duty to your family and rest there,—unless, indeed, in one way, and that is by a definition of duty which includes love and passion and sacrifice; if such terms are included in the word duty, then the word duty will be sufficient, but usually "duty" is a kind of military term or commercial phrase, a *quid pro quo*, a doing of

certain things for certain exchanges, a beginning at a definite hour and a ceasing at a specific time. Cyrus called for spontaneous replies: Who will do this? That is the question which God puts to us. Who will go? Who will represent the right and the true, the pure and the beautiful, to those who have never seen those fair images or obeyed their high demands? We must do nothing by constraint. The moment a man begins to feel his work to be irksome there is no value in it, no virtue, no honour, no real acceptableness. What if the fragrance be part of the value of the flower—the thing it is always giving off, throwing upon the breezes that it may be carried where it may? This religious relationship of ours to one another and to God is not a commercial one; it is not giving so much for so much. As we have said again and again, Christianity is everything or it is nothing.

The people were led by the old—

"Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin" (v. 5).

Men must never say they are too old to take part in new building movements. They might with some show of reason take refuge in this species of excuse; but the truly good man is never old; he takes no note of time, he takes no note of weather: the call has come, and it is his to obey. Some Christian people are leaving a good deal to posterity. They seem to have more faith in posterity than they have in themselves. They propose that the next generation shall complete the building, pay off the debt, and do all sorts of pious and noble things. We do not read much about posterity in this reply to the king's proclamation. Is it generous of us thus to be treating posterity? Has posterity ever begged this favour at our hands, saying, Do leave something for us to do? Posterity never committed itself to so foolish a prayer. There may be no posterity: the thing may have to be done this day, and living men must do it. It is not for us to measure men's philanthropy. There may be some subtle and inscrutable passion of the heart which takes an ineffable interest in posterity, and it would be unwise in any preacher to question the mysterious operations that are proceeding in the human soul; at the same time, posterity is now at least a little too impalpable for us to have much to do with it. The question is, What answer are we going to make to great demands? The opportunity is

always urgent, and always a means of education to those who avail themselves of it.

What need had God for a house? He made the stars; he wears the constellations as a garment; the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain him: what does he want with a house? Nothing; but he knows that we do; he knows that the building of the house is necessary for our education. What need has he of our prayer? None. Can we tell him anything? No. Does he not know what things we have need of before we ask him? Yes. Why then should he call upon us to tell him what he knows, to ask him for what he well understands we need? Why should there be any throne of grace or altar of prayer? For our sakes. This is a means of education. We learn things by doing them. We get answers by prayer and in prayer. Prayer is oftentimes its own answer. We may have been too critical, and exercising a vain discrimination in these matters, in distinguishing between a prayer offered and an answer given: we may not yet have seen that whilst we are praying we are being answered—that to pray is to receive. The man does not pray who simply asks for favours. No wonder that he is dissatisfied with the reply; he is a mere beggar or suppliant; he is not a communing son, entering with grace and joy into communion and fellowship with God, being absorbed in the divine nature, and returning from his high contemplation and pure devotion with a chastened spirit, an ennobled charity, and a beneficence that has consummated in sacrifice.

What a restoration there was after this revival!

"Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods" (v. 7).

Observe that as a period of restoration. Things that had been stolen were brought back; vessels that had been alienated were set in their rightful places. There was a great restoration of misappropriated property. What a restoration there will one day be! What have men taken away from God's Church? Nearly everything they could lay hands on. They have taken away Gold, Art, Music, Miracles, Inspiration, Rationalism, Morality, Science, and they have left God a very bare house. When

the period of spiritual revival has come, and the holy issue is written out in all its meaning, these things will be brought back again: Art will come with her brush and pencil, and say, I will beautify the house of God's revelation; Music will bring back her harp and her instrument of ten strings, and her cymbals and organ, and say, Make me a handmaid in God's house, for all I have and am must belong to him; and Reason—exiled, expatriated Reason—shall return, saying, They have kept me in vile servitude—admit me to my Father's house; and Science will come and pray; and Morality will say, They have been trying to divorce me from theology, from right religious motive and impulse, and I have died like a flower that has been plucked; restore me to my vital relations, and I will once more bloom in the house of God. What a return, too, of prodigal sons there will be, of men who thought there was not scope enough for them in God's house; clever men who for the moment had forgotten themselves, and went forth into the outer world to find more room. They will come in, saying, What fools we were; we did not see the staircase winding upward into infinite spaces; we thought the Church was all dead level walling, and having laid our lines and measurements upon it, we said the Church was not big enough for us; but now we see, where we ought to have seen before, an opening door, and, beyond, a staircase, leading away, away; let us also return!

Judge the inspiration by the restoration. Do not be content with reading the proclamation of Cyrus, but see what it leads to. Do not be content with reading the Bible, but see what that reading results in. Do not be content when any priest or preacher tells you that any book is inspired; reply to him, Let me read the book for myself, through and through, carefully, word by word, and when I have finished I shall know whether the book is inspired or not. If I be enlarged, inflamed, lifted up, ennobled; if I melt in charity, if I abound in love, if I would have all men come and read the same book and drink at the same fountain, then I shall know that it is God's Book, a living Book, —sweet, tender, gracious, complete, touching life at every point, and answering it with infinite replies. By that test God is willing that his Book or proclamation should be judged.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, thou hast set above all things the cross of Jesus Christ thy Son. All things are now changed by that cross—all values, and meanings, and influences. Those things that were princely have become mean; ambitions have been rebuked, powers have been overthrown, and the weakness of God is stronger than the might of men. We now see these truths as we never saw them before, and they make us glad. We have been blind, we have been groping in infinite darkness, not knowing the right hand from the left; but now that we have seen the cross we know how all things lie, where heaven is, where thy throne is set, and we see a great light far away, shining like an infinite welcome. We bless thee for the cross of Christ: it is the way to heaven; it is the mystery of love; it is high above us like a great sky, yet round about us like a living air. We will not glory but in the cross: its shame is greater in glory than is all the pride in creation; its very weakness is almightiness; its condescension is majesty. Thy love is shown in the cross of Jesus; and we need that cross more and more as we see what sin is, and feel how poor and weak we are ourselves. Blessed cross! tree of death, yet tree of life; an open way for sinners only into heaven's eternal peace. Precious cross of Christ! the life of the world, the security of the universe; we gather round thee and bless the love that set thee up. We are crucified with Christ: nevertheless we live; yet not we, but Christ liveth in us: and the life which we now live in the flesh we live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved us, and gave himself for us. No man entereth into this wisdom but he who is taught of God. Verily it is folly of all folly to those who serve the flesh and are greedy for the world. How nobly wise, how tenderly beautiful, is the cross of Christ to those who have begun to see that without the cross the world is a deception and life an intolerable lie! We praise thee for what visions we have had of the cross: they have made us glad; we can never forget them; they have given a new setting and tone to our whole life: we are debtors to the cross, and our debt we can never pay. Help us to think upon these things with steadfastness of attention. May we know that these are the deep things of God, that the universe is but a temporary accident, the momentary clothing of God, to be thrown off and forgotten, but at the heart of things lies the eternal fact of sacrifice. Save us from distracted attention; save us from mistaking things for great because they are only near; give us the genius of the heart which sees things as they really are; and give us that true wisdom which knows where to build the altar and to what to offer the tribute of our life. We are here but for a day or two; we are pilgrims and can tarry but for a night; we are on the high road: we cannot see more than one step at a time; the next step may be the grave, or there may be long chequered years

yet before us and to be traversed: help us to lay hold of thy hand, O Leading One; to stop where thou dost stop; teach us that to obey is to conquer, that to receive God's will and live it is to be in God's heaven: then shall we have no unrest, or disquiet, or cancer of the heart eating out our love and peace; we shall be calm with God's tranquillity and steadfast in God's almightiness. Regard us as men who need daily light and daily care. Thou didst never put two days into any man's hand at once. We are not to boast of to-morrow. Help, Lord, for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from among the children of men: the true, the noble, the beautiful, the good are taken away like shadows; those whom we accounted as rocks are overturned, and we shall see their faces no more; the great and the small die. Help us to know that though we too must die, yet whilst we live we may live a doubly energetic or beneficent life. May we work with both hands earnestly, sparing nothing, hiding in our hearts the sweet thought that the Son of man may come to-day. Blessed are they who shall be found ready when he opens heaven's door, and comes down to claim the issue of his sacrifice. May he see of the travail of his soul, and be satisfied! In that spirit would we wait and toil and hope, not as fools but as wise, seizing time with a strong hand, and filling it to the full with duty and with sacrifice. Heal our broken hearts; dry our penitential tears; subdue our unholy anger, and lead us in the way everlasting. Speak to the old man, and he will be young again; lay thy hand, so gentle because so mighty, on the youngest child and the weakest life, and it shall become dignified and noble. Visit our sick-chambers; we steal up to them, lest the very noise of the footfall should injure those we love; do thou go in with the boldness of love, and heal our sick with the momentary health of the body or with the immortality which comes through faith. Watch us; care for us; be pitiful to us. We are bruised reeds; we are as smoking flax; we are as a flower which cometh for a little time and then passeth away because the wind is cold. We know our prayer shall be heard; for thy mercy reacheth unto the heavens. Amen.

Ezra ii.

1. Now these are the children of the province [Judea] that went up out of the captivity, of those which had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away, unto Babylon [as into a lion's den, see Nahum ii. 10], and came again unto Jerusalem and Judah, every one unto his city [the cities and villages are more distinctly enumerated by Nehemiah];

43. The Nethinims [the lowest order of the ministry (Numb. xxxi. 47; Josh. ix. 23)]: the children of Ziha, the children of Hasupha, the children of Tabbaoth,

55. The children of Solomon's servants [formed of the residue of the Canaanites, supposed to be inferior to the Nethinims]: the children of Sotai, the children of Sophereth, the children of Peruda,

59. And these were they which went up from Tel-melah [hill of salt] Tel-harsa [hill of the wood], Cherub, Addan, and Immer: but they could not show their father's house, and their seed, whether they were of Israel

[those who had lost the records of their lineage. Even of the priests there were three families without genealogy]:

60. The children of Delaiah, the children of Tobiah, the children of Nekoda, six hundred fifty and two.

61. And of the children of the priests: the children of Habaiah, the children of Koz, the children of Barzillai: which took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite [2 Sam. xviii. 27], and was called after their [her] name:

62. These sought their register among those that were reckoned by genealogy, but they were not found: therefore were they, as polluted, put from the priesthood [Levitically disqualified].

MELANCHOLY RECORDS.

WHATEVER the local incident may have been—and into that it may not be wholly profitable to inquire—the great principle remains in operation to-day, and is pathetically and painfully illustrated in many a living instance. The idea is that the people who are referred to sought their register expecting to find their names recorded, and when the scroll was searched the names were not found there. Here is the picture of men seeking a register, and finding nothing in it; looking up old family papers, and their names are not found in the tender record.

A man not known at home! He may have been born there, and have lived a good many years of his early life there; but to-day he has no record on the hearthstone, no place at the table, no portion in the family memory: it would be a breach of courtesy to name his name; his health may not be inquired after; even the most delicate and well-calculated solicitude must not be expressed. The man in question is not; he is living, he has a place somewhere on the earth, but those who gave him birth do not know where, and those who once cared for him never mention him even in prayer. Something must have happened. There is an ineffable sadness about this: all nature seems to be violated; instincts have been rooted out; natural affection seems to have been burned down and utterly destroyed: how is this? Events of this kind do not come about without explanation. Children are not cast out for small offences, for venial transgressions; these are forgotten by the hundred, and the great substantial affection is untouched. But here is an instance of

a man taking you to his home to prove his nativity and his own home saying, in effect—I never knew you: you are as if you had never been. Consider the tremendous possibility of outliving one's natural rights, or forfeiting birthright, inheritance, paternal blessing, all the wealth of home's true love. Talk of falling from grace! What is this but an apostacy from the best grace—a fall from childhood's trust, the wilful obliteration of the name from the scroll whose meaning is nothing but love?

Here is a child who is not named in the will. He says, My progenitors are dead: the will is to be read to-day. I will be in good time to hear it, because my name is certain to occur in the will. The document is read, and no mention is made of the person in question. Men are not treated thus for trivial offences, let us say again and again. We must get at the root of this, or we shall trifle with facts, and shall heap opprobrium unjustly upon the memories of the dead. Consider what you have done. How infinite in detestation must have been the character which resulted in this issue! Surely they might have left you something at the last, and would have done so but that your conduct touched the point of unpardonableness. There is an unpardonable sin in social life: why all this ado about an unpardonable sin in higher spheres? The unpardonableness is not with God; but the utterness of the corruption, the completeness of the blasphemy, is with man. The testator halted at one point; he thought he would leave you something, but considerations crowded upon his memory, and not upon his memory only but upon his conscience, his sense of justice, and he felt at the very last, when men are most melted in heart, most clement and tender in feeling, that he could not overlook the tremendous transgression. He may have been wrong; we are not concerned now to rectify cases of that kind or inquire into them; but here is the principle, that it has been as a matter of fact found possible for a man to obliterate his name at home, and so to live that those who gave him birth have in effect forgotten his existence in shame.

Take more general ground, and the principle still applies. Here is a man who is unknown in the community; his name may be written upon certain official papers, but it is not inscribed

on the scroll of the heart, on the memory of gratitude; it is not to be found anywhere put up as a thing most prized and loved. He is but a figure in the community, but a tax-payer, but an occupier of a house; he is not a living presence in any sense of beneficence, comforting the friendless, blessing the poor, assisting the helpless, and doing all ministries of love and tenderness. He is not known! When he is buried no one will miss him in the heart. His name is not written upon the register of trust, affection, or benevolent interest.

Seeing that all these things are possible there must be a reason for them: what is it? It is always a moral reason, where it touches any conception of general justice. Not because the child was deaf, dumb, blind, was he left out of the will—never; human nature rises to protest against the infamous suggestion. Not because the child was ill-shaped, wanting in fairness and loveliness of form and colour, was he forgotten at home: nay, contrariwise, he may have been the fairest of the whole flock, the very flower of all the family, bright in mind and invested with a thousand charms; but somehow his heart got wrong, his best nature was poisoned, perverted, turned downwards towards ruin; all natural feeling was extinguished; the man became as a beast in fierceness: he dispossessed himself by moral processes. That is the only dispossession that is possible. A man may overget everything else, but when he has forfeited confidence, trust, love, moral veneration, no matter how keen his wit, how vast his learning, how charming his personal manners, he is looked upon as twice dead, plucked up by the roots, something to be avoided, a life that spreads pestilence in the air. At the last shall we go to the book of life, and not find our names there? The answer is in our own lives. No man, be he ever so great a foe, can remove our names from God's book of life—there the enemy has no power; but we must have first so related ourselves to God as to have had a name written amongst the blessed, the pardoned, the pure. Let every man answer the question for himself. To-day it is of little or no consequence; but the time will come when registers will be looked up, when histories will be read, when old archives will be searched; and no matter where our names may be written if

they are not written in the book of life, our fame will be infamy, our elevation will mark the spot from which our fall shall be the most tremendous. Sad to turn away from the record, saying, My name is not there! But, blessed be God, the humblest, least, vilest may, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, the whole mystery of the priesthood of Christ, have their names written in heaven. Compared with that, all other fame is noise, all other reputation is a bubble or a shadow.

We find the next point in the sixty-third verse—

"And the Tirshatha [the Feared] said unto them, that they should not eat of the most holy things [make a gain of the priesthood], till there stood up a priest with Urim and with Thummim."

That principle still operates. It is the principle of regard to technicality, form, established stipulation, and regulation; it is the principle of mechanical piety or mechanical service. The rule was that religious privilege was to be denied until certain mechanical arrangements were re-established—"till there stood up a priest with Urim and with Thummim." No matter how great the hunger—for it was a question of hunger—they should not eat of the most holy things; until the technical arrangements were completed the eager appetite must be held in check. Blessed be God, there is nothing technical on the way to the enjoyment of God's love. Let us beware of man-made gates and locks and pass-words. They are but human inventions, and they have done incalculable mischief to the very Church which they were intended in some general way to serve. Who are we that we should limit the number to be saved? By what authority do we stand at any house we have built and say, Only such and such shall enjoy the franchise of this dwelling of God? If we limit our attendances by certain regulations of our own invention, let those regulations be known, but never call the house by the name of God. You cannot have a great God and a little charity; an infinite Redeemer and a small prey taken from the spoiler by his mighty hand. By what names are our houses called? Call them by our own names, and then every magnitude may be measured by the scale of our personality; but call them by the name of God, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain him; call them by the name of Christ,

and he would have all the world evangelised and saved; call them by the name of the Holy Spirit, and who may limit the Holy One of Israel, saying, He shall dwell here, but not there, when his presence shineth as the lightning from the east even unto the west? There are ironies that cannot be tolerated even in social speech, but no irony can compare with a house called by the name of God, and yet limited as to its spiritual accommodation by the selfishness or the prejudice of man. But may not many come in unworthily? We answer, Many come in unworthily now. You never can keep the unworthy out; they will find some method of climbing over the wall or forcing their way. The people we keep out are the true, the honest, the modest, the simple, the self-distrustful. No wall ever built by human hands could keep a hypocrite out of the visible Church. No catechism, creed, or standard, could keep the bad man from the altar, if he wished to be there: his oath is ready, his signature is always within call; whatever the terms are he is ready to comply with them. The liar has great capacity; the vicious man has in some respects greater liberty of action than the virtuous man, for nothing stands in his way: he can run, or leap, or wait, or lie, or play the cunning trick, or speak the true word with an untrue emphasis; he can win his end, for a moment at least. On the other hand, how many are kept away from eating the most holy things because some priest has set up a gate through which the hungry ones must come, or must not come at all. All inventions of this kind must give way before the hunger of the heart. When the spiritual life is considered to be equivalent to the heart-hunger, conscious heart-need, then what freedom, even to the point of infinity and glory, shall be realised within the tabernacle and kingdom of God! This participation of the holy things is not a question of science, theology, formulated dogma, stipulated creed; it is a question of burning thirst, devouring hunger, holy desire after the living God. Where men are conscious of such thirst, such hunger, such desire, they may come into God's house, though there be no priest there in human form, no blazing stones worn by consecrated men: by the very sun that shines in the heavens, by the copious rain that falls on the just and on the unjust, they have a right to reason their way upward into the infinity of God's hospitality. If you are turned

out of any church because of human regulations, then draw near to one another outside, on the common street, in the green field, under the shadowing tree, and there begin to exemplify the true idea of the Church: only learn from your own exclusion not to exclude other people, who do not see things precisely as you see them: the substantial requisite is, desire after the living God, conscious need of all that heaven means, self-distrust, and the outgoing of the heart towards the blessed cross of Christ,—find these, and you find a Church against which the gates of hell shall not prevail.

Now the great procession moved on towards the appointed place to accomplish the divinely-appointed work. Some kind of inventory is given of numbers and of possessions—

64. The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and three score [the same as in Nehemiah].

65. Beside their servants and their maids, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven: and there were among them two hundred singing men and singing women [hired for lamentation as well as joy].

66. Their horses were seven hundred thirty and six; their mules, two hundred forty and five;

67. Their camels, four hundred thirty and five; their asses, six thousand seven hundred and twenty [in early Hebrew history the asses are the chief and most numerous beasts of burden].

There was mechanical arrangement, there was formality, there was order in the whole procession. Men who are going up to build God a house must in the very process of their going show at least some measure of equipment and qualification for their work. We cannot leap instantly out of disorder into order; we cannot live a slovenly, unformulated life six days in the week, and on the seventh become very patterns of piety and system and consecration. Even in going to his business a man shows somewhat of his qualification to discharge it; the very first step he takes out of his house towards the scene of labour shows him a man of precision, energy, determination. Do not despise the preliminary, the initial, the alphabetical. Numbers were used because every one was then accounted of value. Nothing was brought into great lumps and masses, so to speak, but everything was individualised, so that every man, woman, child, and animal had a place upon the record. Some with too critical an eye might

observe that amongst the beasts that went up with the people the asses were the greatest in number—"their asses, six thousand seven hundred and twenty," and every one was counted. How does it come that this is always the same throughout the world? It is inexplicable, and yet it involves a principle which ought to be detected and applied, if we would touch some of the vital points in the great economy of God. How is it that the most of men are incapable, wanting in faculty, having a positive genius for doing things the wrong way? It is incredible but for facts a thousand thick, one coming in after the other to tell the tale of incapableness. The men are not altogether wanting in good qualities; they are civil, obliging; they are not indolent; and yet they always miss the point, or their arrow falls invariably within six inches of the target; they are if not industrious at least busy, often busy wearing themselves out, throwing buckets into empty wells, and bringing them up again; they often perspire more than men who are doing ten times the work. You cannot charge them with indolence, but somehow there is a marked incapableness about them. Have they no fingers? Do they not take hold of things properly? We cannot tell. We must not be severe upon them; they may have been given in charge to society; they may have been meant to play a wonderful part in the education of the world. God despises none: how much better, then, is a man than a sheep: if God take care of oxen will he not take care of men: if he take note of the way of the fowls of the air, will he be heedless regarding the steps of his children? Christ is a good shepherd; he will leave none of his sheep behind; he will cause the whole flock to halt until the weariest shall be recruited a little; yea, if need be, he will carry the lambs in his bosom. He knows our frame, he remembers that we are dust; he knows that he did not invest us all with ten talents; to some he gave two, and to some but one talent; he has not given an equality of genius to the human race: what if he has made the strong in order that they may help the weak; what if he has created the great that they may make themselves greater by taking benevolent interest in the weak and feeble and little? Thus is society consolidated and educated. "Ye that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak"; and, brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault—if one of his joints, literally, should be dislocated, stop and put the

limb in its place again, for time so spent is not time wasted but time doubly improved, as holy disposition would improve it. There is a majority of quality as well as a majority of number. Some are to be weighed rather than counted, even when they come together in their hosts. God is judge. It is not for us always to say, These belong to horses, these to camels, these to mules, these to asses. We should abstain from all scornful and contemptuous names, and realise the great socialism of God which is suggested in the words—we belong to one another. There is not a poor man in the world that does not belong to the rich man; there is not a helpless creature on God's earth who has not, supposing character not to have been forfeited and blasted, some claim upon general human attention.

68. And some [and only some] of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house [*rather*, the site of the house] of the Lord which is at Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God to set it up in his place:

69. They gave after their ability unto the treasure of the work threescore and one thousand drams [a dram was little more than an English guinea] of gold, and five thousand pound [the pound was rather more than £4] of silver, and one hundred priests' garments.

70. So the priests, and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities [thus the revival was national, and not confined to Judah and Benjamin].

How delightful it is to read about the generosity of other people; is there any poetry equal to a subscription list filled with names of benevolent persons of whom we never heard? How charming to learn that a church has been opened free of debt; and how double the delight when we know that we did not subscribe one halfpenny to the result! To read of ancient generosity—why, it transports the feeling, it delights and ravishes the soul of man. So it may be in your little village: the people were poor, but they put their pennies together and struggled bravely with the burden, and at last threw it off, and you presided at the thanksgiving meeting, having subscribed nothing to it but a speech. At the same time, what can be more touching and more edifying than to read of the generous deeds of others? and how beautiful to recite chivalric poetry; how extremely entertaining for a young man who is afraid of the tiniest dog that ever barked to stand up and repeat heroic lines about illustrious ancestors. Let us get rid of this folly. We must ourselves be

generous. We must ourselves be heroic. It is nothing but a mischief when a man has to live upon the reputation of his forefathers, either for generosity or chivalry. Our ancestors should re-live their lives in us, should double themselves in our personality; and we should try to take one step in advance of the most advanced forefather we ever had. But the building of God's house goes up; give who may, withhold who may, up goes the great temple of God. He will build if we desist: if we hold our peace the very stones will cry out, and God shall receive hallelujahs from unexpected tongues if the tongues of his children are silent. How great might be the house of God, how high, making the whole neighbourhood sacred; we ought to be able to say, The people in this or in that locality will be high-minded people, ennobled by religious veneration, because the church is in the midst of the neighbourhood, and that church could never be anywhere without elevating, ennobling, refining, the whole district in which it stands: its doctrine is so noble, its charity so sweet, its temper so benevolent; the eloquence of that house is so personated in actual life that it sanctifies the whole locality. How broad might be the Church, including all lawful amusement, recreation, entertainment; being a real family-house, an enlarged home, a place of hospitality, and music, and trust, and love. How enchanting might be the house of God, having within it all beauty, all loveliness, everything that can appeal to the highest sensibilities, and satisfy the best desires of sanctified human nature. To have had a hand in building God's house, that is fame enough; to have been allowed to put just one little stone in God's temple surely is sufficient renown for any man. Here is a work in which we can all engage: we can teach a little child; we can help a blind man across a thoroughfare; we can divide our loaf with some hungering and unfortunate fellow-creature; we can lend a hand where the burden is too heavy for the back; we can speak a word of cheer even where we cannot fulfil a sacrifice. Broad is the horizon, infinite the sphere and the opportunity of labour. Shame on him who stands back and declares that no man hath hired him. God asks for our service. In condescension he allows us to work. When we work we are happy. When we are indolent we lose our faculty, and our hope dies in cloud, in night.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, come to us with a voice of joy and hope, saying unto us in our loneliness and fear, The winter is over and gone; now the summer is coming with all its broad warm light; and the voice of birds is heard in the air. Some are weary with waiting; they are full of sadness; their vision is one of gloom and dread, and they know not what shall be on the morrow except there be some deeper darkness. Our life itself is spent in the night-time; we call some part of it by the name of day: but what can we tell of light? What do we know of thy meaning when thou callest men into the land of the morning? We have never seen the light as thou hast seen it; we have beheld that which is but a dim type of it, a grey outline of an infinite majesty. Help us to believe that the light cometh, and also the morning, and whilst we look forward to the dawn we shall forget the midnight, and remember our sorrows no more. What is thy gospel of love but a voice of hope, an assurance that we do not see everything now, and that what we do see is not beheld in all its reality and beauty? Hast thou not promised a sweet, bright by-and-by for those who put their trust in the living God and confidently wait upon him in all patience? Thou wilt surprise such by thy wealth of light; thou wilt astonish with a great astonishment of joy those who have been trusting thee in the night-time, and walking onward, sometimes hesitatingly, sometimes stumblingly, yet always with their hand in thy hand, thou Parent and King of all. For all such hopes we bless thee: they make us patient: they give us victory over death and the grave; they enable us to mock our afflictions, calling them light and enduring but for a moment, when compared with the eternal weight of glory which is in reserve for those who through Christ Jesus walk steadfastly in the way of thy grace. Thou wilt not forget us; thou hast graven our names upon the palms of thy hands; the walls of Zion are continually before thee; thou dost beset us behind and before, and lay thine hand upon us, and no good thing dost thou withhold from us, except it be to quicken our hunger and make more intense our thirst for the living God and all his truth. Surely thou hast been with us all these days in the desert. Thou hast wrought within us a strange miracle: now time has no dread for us; time cannot threaten us with long duration; we have lived to see that time is nothing; the days are fleeting shadows and the end will be here presently, and all the twilight will depart and the full shining of the sun will come. Thou hast delivered us from one oppression after another. We bless thee for emancipating us from the prison of time. Once we counted the days, and thought them long; in our childhood the years were ages, and the ages were incalculable: now days come and go, and we know not the one from the other, and behold the earth has rolled through its little circle before we

have had time to consider: eternity is nearer than time; heaven is closer upon us than is the earth, for the earth is slipping away from under our feet, and all heaven is enclosing us with an atmosphere of warmth, and filling our senses with peculiar and all-satisfying delight. Now deliver us from the bondage of the letter. We thank thee that we have somewhat escaped from that enslavement. We begin to see the meaning of the spirit, to know that the letter was but a signal pointing to something beyond itself and infinitely larger than itself: to that other and grander something we would come as the elders came to Mount Zion. May we grow from the bondage of service into the liberty of obedience, so that obedience shall no longer be a task, an effort, or an aspect of discipline, but shall be our supreme joy, the very beginning and pledge of heaven within us; we shall turn thy statutes into songs in the house of our pilgrimage. Thou hast set each of us to do some work: enable each worker to find out what his work really is, and then to do it with both hands earnestly, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of faith, for daily inspiration, for daily succour. May our attitude be one of service and of expectation, knowing how blessed is that servant who shall be found watching and waiting when his Lord cometh. Blessed Saviour of the world, come to us in all thy gracious power and complete thy ministry in our hearts. We would be purified, elevated, ennobled, made holy and perfect as our Father in heaven. Thou only, Son of God, thou alone canst work in us all the perfectness of thy purpose. May there be nothing left in us that is untrue, unfaithful, but may the whole soul be transfigured; by the transforming power of thy grace may we reflect the image of the triune God. Pity us in all our littlenesses and unworthy thoughts, and conscious or unconscious infirmities; give us eyes that see everything aright; work in us that spirit of judgment that cannot be deceived; bless us with that discernment which knows wickedness afar off and hates it with infinite detestation. Give us power in prayer; may we be more than conquerors when we come before the throne to utter our supplications and wrestle with God for victory. Thou dost accommodate thine omnipotence to our weakness, so that in our wrestlings we are permitted to overthrow and to receive from thee a new name, significant of largeness and victory. Look upon all men, women, and children. Shed upon the world's weariness some balm that will help the world to recover its energy. Pity those who sit in darkness and fill the night with tears; have compassion upon those who know not the right hand from the left because of some sudden stroke which has thrown them into bewilderment. Save us from despair; save us from ourselves; give us consciousness of thy nearness and thy power: then shall our poor life work out its little tale of days, knowing that at the end the reward will come. Forgive us every sin; yea, the whole multitude of our sins do thou pardon, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who loved us and gave himself for us, and redeemed us with his own precious blood. We always await thine answer: we know how thou canst whisper to the heart; we know how thou canst assure us of all thy love. Come in thine own way, and at thine own time; only give us confidence that thou wilt come: then we can wait with the assurance of those who have no doubt, with the dignity of men who know that already the King is at the door and heaven is about to dawn. Amen.

Ezra iii.

1. And when the seventh month [a month of festivities (Lev. xxiii.)] was come [approached], and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man [with one consent] to Jerusalem.

2. Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar [the Temple was built around the altar, which was the centre of all] of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God.

3. And they set the altar upon his bases [upon its old site]; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the Lord, even burnt offerings morning and evening.

4. They kept also the feast of tabernacles [booths built of branches], as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the custom [they were careful to avoid everything like innovation], as the duty of every day required;

5. And afterward offered the continual burnt offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the Lord that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered a freewill offering unto the Lord.

6. From the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt offerings unto the Lord. But the foundation of the temple of the Lord was not yet laid.

7. They gave money [their own workmen were paid in money] also unto the masons, and to the carpenters; and meat, and drink, and oil, unto them of Zidon, and to them of Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa [to which the cedar trees were sent], according to the grant that they had of Cyrus king of Persia [the authority of Cyrus over Phœnicia was undoubted].

8. Now in the second year of their coming unto the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, began Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the remnant of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all they that were come out of the captivity unto Jerusalem; and appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to set forward the work of the house of the Lord [for the original ordinances, see 1 Chron. xxiii.].

9. Then stood Jeshua with his sons and his brethren, Kadmiel [Jeshua and Kadmiel were the two heads of Levitical families] and his sons, the sons of Judah, together, to set forward the workmen in the house of God: the sons of Henadad, with their sons and their brethren the Levites.

10. And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the Lord, after the ordinance of David king of Israel [so once more all goes back to historical methods].

11. And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord [the praise was antiphonal]; because he is good, for his mercy

endureth for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.

12. But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy:

13. So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off.

DAILY DUTY.

"The people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem" (v. 1).

THE emphasis must be laid upon the expression "one man." There are times when we are struck by individuality; we go into detail, and speak with some critical minuteness about one man's peculiarity and another man's eccentricity. There are other times when we take no heed of the unit, except as it is representative of the sum total; we forget characteristics, points of separation, in the grand consolidation of human beings all intent upon the accomplishment of one purpose or the expression of one holy thought. We need not think of the number as being large arithmetically; probably in an arithmetical point of view the number on this occasion was not large: but how many soever were in it, the whole represented but "one man,"—a solid energy, a glorious and effective unity of strength. Why? They were brought together partly by love and partly by fear. When the altar was set up on this occasion it was the first symbol of defiance to all the surrounding and observing heathens. Church-building is nothing in civilised or christianised lands to-day. A hundred churches can be in course of erection in any of the chief cities of the globe now given up to the Christian profession, and the citizens would pay but little heed to the fact that so many pinnacles were rising to the clouds. We must recall the circumstances under which the altar was set up. Heathenism prevailed even in places once holy; the whole spirit and genius of the time was against the worship of the true and living God: when the smoke curled upward from the new altar

it was like a signal of defiance to those who had given themselves up to worship the hosts of heaven, or the beasts of the earth, or images of their own fashioning. Religious liberty has its disadvantages. In our dreaming we suppose that if all men stood upon a religious level, and all men professed the same form of faith, we should have enjoyment and high enthusiastic delight in religion; sometimes we have supposed that if persecution could be put down, and every man could utter his own thoughts in his own words, then we should have heaven upon earth. It is not so. The dream is not founded upon a right conception of human nature. Perhaps there is not much that is to be more dreaded than the cessation of persecution. Men prayed in the old days, when the wolf was about the city, when the tiger might be let loose at any moment, when every sound that was heard might be the approach of the persecutor; men then prayed when they wanted to pray; that was no child's work; prayer was then an agony, and therefore it prevailed. When we can build altars where we like and how we like, we may soon cease to build altars at all. The danger of the cessation of persecution is the danger of deadly indifference. Persecution was turned into a motive to worship; Christians were brought together in one holy consent and brotherhood: they needed such association for the stimulus of each other's confidence, the assurance of each other's faith and hope; men felt safe when they were near the altar. To-day the world, measured by Christian nominal profession, suffers under the disease of indifference. Men do not care whether they go to church or not; they can be satisfied with very little church-going or religious worship and sacrifice; if they give it up altogether they will not miss much of social patronage or social enjoyment. There is no threatening abroad in the land now against men who pray in any place they may choose for their sanctuary. What, then, is forgotten in that view of things? It is forgotten that persecution cannot cease; it only changes its form: for ever will it be true that they that will live actually in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. The old vulgar way is thrown out of history altogether, or so thrown back as to be almost beyond recollection; fire and faggot, and thumb-screw and executioner's block and axe,—these are terms that have lost all accent and force of meaning; but the one enemy always lives; the

devil never succumbs. The persecution may now come spiritually. A man may be fighting battles every day in the week and no other man may know of it. Do not suppose that enemies are all external and numerable, and are open to such treatment as is possible to mere phases of antagonism as represented by the action of the hands; we are never safe but at the altar; we are never safe but within the enclosure of the fold; we may not venture far by ourselves, or trust to the light of our own wit or the guidance of our own fancy to discover a path in the wide desert hitherto untrodden by human feet: our safety is in fellowship, in association, in keeping quite closely together. To break away from the security of being so near to one another as to take consultation almost in whispers, is to give up the battle, is to accept defeat.

Great occasions bring men together. Special historical crises cause men to forget all littlenesses of difference and to come together in one mass as against a common foe. We could create such crises if we pleased. We have been looking for them as coming to us: why not now change the point of observation and look out for them, and prepare ourselves to create them? How can this be done? This can be done by looking at the real evils that afflict the land. Men deny the poverty when they do not look out; men take a roseate view of things when they turn their back upon them. Let the Church of the living God bring before its view the real state of the country to-day, and all controversies of a wordy nature, all mere fray of expressions, attacks, replies, accusations, retorts,—all this would be forgotten in the awful wonder that there is so much of perdition actually at the very doors. The Church will never be united in controversy: it may be united in philanthropy. The children are naked, ignorant, forsaken; there is worldliness in their poor young eyes that ought to be full of light and poetry and hope; there is a leanness upon them that indicates a leanness within as well as a hunger and deprivation of the body. The devil is building his smoking altars at every street corner, and the metropolis of the world groans because of its intolerable sin and grief and weariness. If men will read their spirited journals, their dazzling romances, and drink their foaming wine, and enjoy their smoking feasts,

and clothe themselves in the garments of vanity, they will deny all these things, and say, in some flippant tone, that there is more happiness in the world than is often supposed. We are not called upon to measure that happiness, but to dig down to the roots of the misery, and get them all eradicated, and burned with unquenchable fire. Were we to look in these directions we should make a historical crisis; we should not have to wait for the occasion that unites men's hearts. Let representatives of all the Christian communions of the country go down some of the back slums and alleys of the metropolis, and in the sight of unimagined misery they will forget their ecclesiastical controversies and cease the bitterness of their mutual reproach.

A beautiful expression is found in the second verse—

"As it is written in the law."

We cannot get rid of something that lies behind and beneath all external action. That sacred something is "the law." Do not qualify that term by the "ancient," or the "Mosaic," or the "ceremonial," or some other limiting word: there are certain terms that look best when they are unqualified. We speak of "the law of Moses," and thus we limit an illimitable term; we speak of "the divine justice," as if justice had two phases or aspects or degrees of dignity: "justice" is a grander word than "divine justice"; "law" is an everlasting term; the words "Moses," "ceremonial," "historical," "incidental," must fall off, but the word "law" abides evermore. There is a law of right; there is a law of worship; there is a law of philanthropy; and these laws, or forms of law, never change: we develop them in different ways, we invest them with various aspects, but when we cease to have consciousness of the nearness, reality, and authority of law, then all we have becomes merely sentimental; it may be done, or may not be done; it may be done to-day, or to-morrow; it may be done thus, or otherwise: then men's opinions are ranged against one another, as if opinions were of equal value—as they probably are around the whole circle of intercourse and controversy. What is written in the law? should be the abiding question. Then we build upon a rock. If we begin to unroof our Church, and find that it is slated

with opinions, built with opinions, founded on opinions, that beneath it there is nothing but opinion, the Church may be blown down by any rough wind that cares to do so mean a work; but if the Church is founded upon "the law"—the eternal, the right, the true—then it can only be injured externally, in such a way that loving and generous hands can repair it; but the foundation abideth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his.

In connection with this, however, there is a human name, and in connection with the human name a eulogium which any one might covet. We read, in the second verse once more, of "Moses the man of God." Well for Moses that he is dead! Men become more valued in proportion as they pass away from the vision of their critics, and come into the field of criticism through the haze of fancy and through all the soft regard of sentiment. There was a time when we read thus of Moses—"as for this Moses . . . we wot not what is become of him." He was living then; he was a visible figure in society. Christ ascended early. He said in effect, The body must get out of the way; so long as there is a body to be looked at there will be a point of criticism, and the wrong elements of human nature will be stirred into activity: I must ascend as soon as I have given the last touch to my earthly work. So he went up, and the clouds received him out of sight. How does any man become known as a man of God? The character cannot always be hidden. There is something about a godly man which graciously betrays itself. There is no need for self-demonstration, self-exposure to the moral admiration of mankind; there is a mysterious action in the whole life, a new way of looking at things, saying things, and doing even common things, which men notice and reason about, and finally ascribe to an inspiration not of the earth. The character comes up at last and secures the confidence of mankind. Actions would seem to be subjected to criticism of an unjust and injurious nature, but in the long run there is a mystery which is called Character; it stands out in all its gravity, completeness, and dignity; and within such a character is the mystery of godliness. The righteous shall live for ever. No man can put away the memory of the just; it is blessed for evermore; when the world would forget it,

it retires for a while and then returns with new claims upon human attention and regard. "Moses" is a great name; "Moses the man" is a worthy designation; "Moses the man of God,"—say if in all the Old Testament there can be found a higher designation. We wait until we come into the New Testament for higher titles. "Moses the man of God" is an Old Testament designation;* "Paul a slave of Jesus Christ" is a New Testament designation: they both mean the same thing; you can easily tell which is from the Old Testament and which from the New, but in the soul of them they mean that both the men have touched the living God, and represent eternal thoughts and eternal principles.

See another beautiful expression in the fourth verse—

"As the duty of every day required."

Think of daily duty, daily religion, as we think of daily labour. If duty be discharged diurnally, then it will be impossible for us to fall into arrears. Ay, there's the rub! Our religion is in arrears; we have not balanced the account. We know what this is in daily economy. Our only hope is in paying up to the uttermost farthing at every sundown. If you have a balance of one farthing to the wrong, it is questionable whether you can ever recover your ground; if you have a balance of one farthing to the right in usual finance, you are rich—not in the amount, but in the security, in the dignity, in the freedom, in the independence resulting therefrom. But in this matter of religion, who looks into the question of arrears,—the prayerless days; the days when the altar fire was not kindled or renewed; the days on which no Bible messages were read or set in the memory as a defence against Satan and his wiles; the days when we kept back our right hand from labour, and hid it in our bosom, saying that we would to-day for once have release from toil?

* This honourable appellation (says *The Speaker's Commentary*) is given to Moses five times in the whole of Scripture: once in the Pentateuch (Deut. xxxiii. 1), once in Joshua (xiv. 6), twice in Chronicles (1 Chron. xxiii. 14; 2 Chron. xxx. 16), and once in Ezra (iii. 2). It is also assigned thrice to David (2 Chron. viii. 14; Nehem. xii. 24, 36), and once to the prophet Shemaiah (1 Kings xii. 22). "Man of God" without the article is common.

Have we escaped from the ancient law? we may indeed have so escaped, but only to have come into a wider and more exacting law. The law as it was written by the human hand of Moses cannot cover all the space that is expressed by the Christian word "love." Love works every day, only wishing the day were longer; love doubles its fortune by giving it wisely away; men cause the sun to stand still, and the moon, until the battle is fought, because of their earnestness; mind speaks to matter as a sovereign might speak to a subject, saying, Halt! To deny it is to deny the sovereignty of God. Let us redeem the time, buy up the opportunity, work while it is called day, for the night cometh wherein no man can work. Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord, for they rest from their labours, and their works do follow them. Ask the white-robed ones whether they are sorry they worked so much whilst upon earth, and imagine their gracious indignation as they reply, Who is our master herein? Christ, as always. What said he? he said, I must work while it is called day: still a little light lingers in the western sky, and whilst it is dying there is some child to be blessed, or some weary life to be relieved. All this is to us language of supreme ideality; let that be acknowledged: in declaring such terms we inflict upon ourselves the most tremendous judgments; let that be so: still we must not lower the sky; we must not tamper with the balances of the sanctuary; when we begin to trifle with ideals we shall debase all that is sacred in common life. This is one great function of all church-life—to magnify the ideal, to look at the ideal steadily and calmly, to be rebuked by it in one sense, and to be encouraged by it in another.

"They set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals" (v. 10).

Men are developed into simplicity. Perhaps it may be there that so many mistakes have been made. We have regarded development as rising into intricacy, pomp, multifold splendour and circumstance and dignity; therein we were wrong: the development has been along the whole biblical line towards simplicity; the robes have been thrown off, and all the gold and silver and gems we have read about in the ceremonial books

have been buried, and men have passed on from stage to stage until they came to the simplicity that is in Christ—until they found a man sitting on the mountain-side with his disciples around him, saying, "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God." That is development,—not towards finer garniture, more ornamental clothing; not towards the multiplication of censers and the increase of ritualism, but towards simplicity. Neither in Jerusalem nor in this mountain shall men pray alone, but everywhere, for God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeketh such to worship him. So, then, there is no longer any locality or dress or specialty of function, or wild dreaming about succession of a literal kind; the succession is spiritual; he who has the spirit of the apostles is in the succession of the apostles, and he who has not that spirit is not in that succession, though he may be clothed with the cloak that was left at Troas. Herein lies the deep, broad thought, that the true aristocracy is an aristocracy of mind and character. See one poor pedant with a long list to show what he came down from. Verily, he came "down from"! His words are therefore well chosen. That is an affair of the bones and the sinews and titles of an evanescent kind. There is another lineage. Human nature was reconstituted in Christ. Paul gave up all that was supposed to be of the greatest value, and prided himself with a godly pride upon his descent from Christ and his relation to the eternal Son of God. If other men had whereof they might boast, he had more, and yet he counted all these points of boasting nothing, less than nothing, that he might win Christ. What is our relation to him? Have we on the garment of a pure character? Are we clothed with the habiliments of a noble consecration to Christ? Are we mighty in prayer? Then tell me not of the man of the dented helmet and the broken shield, and the man who "waved above his head the fragment of a blade;" tell me of the man who went after spiritual encounter, who by the grace of God overthrew powers and principalities, and after withstanding was enabled to stand. This is the law of Christian development. We develop away from priest and robe and ephod, and Urim and Thummim, towards simplicity, trust, faith, love, charity.

When the people sang together, and awoke the welkin, praising and giving thanks unto the Lord, what was the burden of their song? "Because he is good." Ay, that accounts for the lofty thundering music. What God are they praising? One about whom they are able to say, "He is good, for his mercy endureth for ever toward Israel." They limited the mercy to Israel, not in their uncharitableness, but in what was then their necessary ignorance. But now the song stands thus:—For he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever: let the house of Aaron say so; let the Gentiles take up the song, and return it in thunderous joy; every man making it a personal song, saying, I too must join that triumphant pæan, for God is good, and his mercy endureth for ever. That is the God of all ages, the God of all lands, the God of all hosts. If we cannot sing until we are theologians, we will never sing; if we are not to take part in the service of the sanctuary until we can give historical references, critical analyses, accurate observations upon letters and changes of literature, then we shall indeed be altogether strangers and foreigners. Let us say, We are going to praise one who is good, whose mercy endureth for ever. Who will join the song?

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, do thou come to us, in all the beauty of light, in all the tenderness of love, and encourage us in every holy work and every sacred enterprise. Give us the spirit of thy Son Jesus Christ, that we may pity the world, that we may see it in its right relation to thyself, and earnestly desire that it may be recovered and set in the liberty of truth and love. We bless thee that thy Son our Saviour came to deliver the world from the thraldom of sin and from all the grief and misery of guilt: may we receive him into our hearts, and answer all his love by sweet and perpetual obedience; may there be no reluctance in our love; may our affection towards him be a complete and burning sacrifice: then shall we work as he worked; we shall go about doing good; we shall weep over the city that is lost, and seek them which are gone astray. We thank thee for thy house: it is a secure dwelling-place; no lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast go up thereon, it shall not be found there; but the redeemed of the Lord shall walk there; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Help us to enter into the realisation of this sacred promise even whilst we tarry upon the earth; give us such gleams of heaven as shall make us glad, such foretaste of the eternal festival as shall quicken the hunger, and then appease it. The Lord look upon us in all the struggle of life—so long, so painful, sometimes so uncertain: now as if Satan would triumph, and, again, as if Christ would crush the serpent's head. Help us to believe that all things work together for good to them that love God; give us confidence in great principles, steadfastness of heart in all things wise and true, and may nothing be able to disturb our confidence or divide our love. Look upon all good men in every enterprise to which they put their hands,—in teaching the young, in guiding the perplexed, in comforting those who have no comforter. Be with all thy ministering servants everywhere, but specially with a double portion of thy Spirit and blessing with those who are labouring in difficult positions; give them to feel that they are thy servants, and that they are engaged in a work which is its own immediate reward, and which is followed by all the glory and rest of heaven: bless their children, and grant unto them a portion of thy Spirit, which no man can take away, illumining the mind, softening the heart, and training the will to instant and joyous obedience. Hear us in all our desires, prayers, and aspirations, and upon the old and the young alike let heaven's blessing rest day by day. Now give us the seeing eye, the hearing ear, the understanding mind, and at the end of our study of thy word may we be strong, resolute, wise, ready to do all thy will through Christ which strengtheneth us. Amen.

Ezra iv.

1. Now when the adversaries [Samaritans] of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity builded the temple unto the Lord God of Israel;

2. Then they came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, Let us build with you: for we seek your God as ye do [hypocrisy]; and we do sacrifice unto him since the days of Esar-haddon king of Assur [he ended his reign B.C. 668], which brought us up hither.

3. But Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers of Israel, said unto them, Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God [this is not intolerance but obedience]; but we ourselves together will build unto the Lord God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us.

4. Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building,

5. And hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia [this systematic opposition continued for eight years, viz., until B.C. 529].

6. And the reign of Ahasuerus [he reigned seven years], in the beginning of his reign, wrote they unto him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

7. And in the days of Artaxerxes [king of Persia, who reigned only seven months] wrote Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of their companions, unto Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the writing of the letter was written in the Syrian tongue, and interpreted in the Syrian tongue [this explains the transition to another language at this point].

8. Rehum the chancellor [the lord of judgment] and Shimshai the scribe [the royal secretary] wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king in this sort:

9. Then wrote Rehum the chancellor, and Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their companions; the Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the Apharsites, the Archevites, the Babylonians, the Susanchites, the Dehavites, and the Elamites,

10. And the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Asnapper brought over, and set in the cities of Samaria, and the rest that are on this side the river, and at such a time.

11. This is the copy of the letter that they sent unto him, even unto Artaxerxes the king: Thy servants the men on this side the river [Euphrates], and at such a time.

12. Be it known unto the king, that the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building the rebellious and the bad city, and have set up the walls thereof, and joined the foundations.

13. Be it known now unto the king, that, if this city be builded, and the walls set up again, then will they not pay toll, tribute, and custom, and so thou shalt endamage the revenue of the kings [*lit.* and at length damage will be done to the kings].

14. Now because we have maintenance from the king's palace [*lit.* we

eat the salt of the palace], and it was not meet for us to see the king's dishonour, therefore have we sent and certified the king;

15. That search may be made in the book of the records of thy fathers [extending to the remote antiquity of the Median dynasty]: so shalt thou find in the book of the records, and know that this city is a rebellious city, and hurtful unto kings and provinces, and that they have moved sedition within the same of old time: for which cause was this city destroyed.

16. We certify the king that, if this city be builded again, and the walls thereof set up, by this means thou shalt have no portion on this side the river.

17. Then sent the king an answer unto Rehum the chancellor, and to Shimshai the scribe, and to the rest of their companions that dwell in Samaria, and unto the rest beyond the river, Peace, and at such a time.

18. The letter which ye sent unto us hath been plainly read before me.

19. And I commanded, and search hath been made, and it is found that this city of old time hath made insurrection against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made therein.

20. There have been mighty kings also over Jerusalem, which have ruled over all countries beyond the river; and toll, tribute, and custom was paid unto them.

21. Give ye now commandment to cause these men to cease, and that this city be not builded, until another commandment shall be given from me.

22. Take heed now that ye fail not to do this: why should damage grow to the hurt of the kings?

23. Now when the copy of king Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum, and Shimshai the scribe, and their companions, they went up in haste to Jerusalem unto the Jews, and made them to cease by force and power.

24. Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem [but the altar as the centre of worship remained]. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

BUILDERS AND ADVERSARIES.

WHY not regard the building of Jerusalem, of the altar, of any portion of the house of God, as typical of the life-building in which we are all engaged? We cannot but be builders: we are building a personal life; we are assisting to put up a social edifice; day by day in proportion as we are in earnest are we putting things together and giving life-shape and commodiousness. Let us think of good men, and great building; of good souls purified as it were with fire, trying to put up a life-house worthy of God's own conception of life. The figure would be beautiful and graphic, nor would it strain the imagination, for we are all more or less conscious that in proportion as we are in earnest do we give shape and purpose and high and solemn meaning to all that we put our hands to.

How does the work go on? Is it all easy, smooth, delightful? Are all circumstances conducive to its prosecution and its ultimate and enduring success? How is the weather with us? How do the winds treat our building? And is the society in the midst of which we are putting up our life-house sympathetic and fraternal? Here we come upon the experience of the first verse:—

"Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard."

We cannot build without the adversaries hearing. There is little secret building in life. For a time we may proceed almost silently, with all the enjoyment of security from the prying and unsympathetic curiosity of enemies; but as the walls rise people stop, and look, and wonder, and interrogate. If those who stop are friends they will say, God bless the builders and their building! may it be roofed in during the summer weather, and may no harm come to so shapely an edifice! But there are many adversaries. The adversary is a man who seeks to discover flaws, disadvantages, mistakes; a man who magnifies all that is unworthy until he makes a great sore and wound of it, so as to offend as many as possible: he knows how the work could have been better done: he sees where every mistake has been committed; and under his breath, or above it, as circumstances may suggest, he curses the builders and their building, and thinks that such an edifice built by such men is but an incubus which the earth is doomed to bear. Regard the criticism of adversaries as inevitable. If we think of it only as incidental, occasional, characteristic of a moment's experience, we shall treat it too lightly: the adversary is an abiding quantity in life; he hates all goodness; he dreads all prayer; he is against every soul that has an upward look. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." The devil is a thousand strong; he is not located here or there nor confined to a particular province; he seems to fill the air, and to strike us from every point of the atmosphere. Be sober; be vigilant; take unto you the whole armour of God: there is no excess of panoply; every piece of the armour is essential.

How subtle the adversary is; how smooth-tongued; how lithe in his motions; how accommodating to the peculiarities of the

mould through which he must pass in order to reach and secure his object!

"Then they came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do" (v. 2).

What could be more harmless, what more courteous, what more sympathetic? But the adversary is bad himself, and therefore all the good words he speaks are but quotations, perversions, or investments. Sometimes we have not only to look at the words but at the speaker: the words themselves are biblical, full of music, glittering with beauty, throbbing with love; but they are spoken with a malign intent: the speaker spoils the speech. We must not receive even gospel words from unconsecrated and unblessed lips. "Let us build with you": let us get into your method of life; let us deepen our acquaintance with you; let us create an intimacy which may be turned to our uses by-and-by; we will be with you, and study you, and look you through and through, and get to know all your passwords, and methods, and customs, and purposes; when the right time comes we will strike a dart through your liver. Beware of your associates. With some men we ought not to build even God's house. We may spoil the sacred edifice by taking money made by the ruin of men. The Samaritans who thus spoke to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, were not telling an absolute lie. No absolute lie can ever do much in the world; its very nakedness would cause it to be driven out of society: it must wear some rag of truth. The Samaritans in the ancient time did worship God after their fashion, but they did not give up a single idolatrous practice; they wanted to have two religions—to serve in some sort all the gods there were, and then when one failed they could flee to another; so they would build any wall, any altar, any city, any sanctuary; they wanted to be at peace with all the gods, then they would know what to do in the day of adversity. We have spoken of the Samaritans of the ancient time; why not speak of the Samaritans of the present day who wish to do this very thing—men who can bow their heads in prayer, and drink toasts to the devil? "Ye cannot serve God and mammon." A man who is your adversary is dangerous in proportion to the small measure of truth that may be in his speech. It is possible for

a man to repeat all the words you say, and yet not to deliver your message: the reality is in the tone, in all the compass and subtle play of the voice and countenance, in the innumerable incidental elements which give emphasis, perspective, and colour to human speech. They do not all pray the same prayer who read out of the same book; nor do they all preach the same gospel who deliver the same sermon. The Samaritans came with a courteous speech. The devil himself was not more harmless when he came to Jesus Christ in the wilderness; he said, If thou be the Son of God, command these stones to be made bread: thou art an hungered, thy strength is failing, thy cheek is wan, there is an unhealthy light in thine eyes,—if thou be the Son of God, use thy power for thyself; it is legitimate exercise of power to make bread of these stones. It was a friend's speech; it was not marked by courtesy only, but by sympathy, by real interest in the hungering man. How often are people overcome by manner, by persuasiveness of tone, by assumed gentleness of spirit! The young creature is often so overcome; she says she knows he who has spoken to her is not a bad man; whatever he be he has a guileless tongue; his words are well chosen; he speaks them as a man might speak who knows the gentleness of pity, all the sympathy of love: it is impossible that he can be simulating such tenderness; it is impossible that he can for selfish reasons be putting himself to such inconvenience and sacrifice. It is to-morrow that she finds out that beneath the velvet there lay the claw of the tiger. Nothing stands but character—real, simple, transparent, solid character. That will bear a thousand blasts of opposition and hostility, and at the end will seem the richer, the chaster, for the rude discipline through which it has passed.

Were the men who went up to build Jerusalem in earnest? Did Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest o the chief of the fathers of Israel speak in the same tone? Did they say, Here is unexpected help; we did not look for this assistance: yea, surely come and help us; the more the builders the sooner will the city be lifted up in its ancient beauty? Leaders must be critical. The man who has little responsibility can soon achieve a reputation for energy. Leaders must halt hesitate balance, and compare

things, and come to conclusions supported by the largest inferences. There are men who would take a short and ready method in accomplishing their purpose; there are men of rude strength, of undisciplined and unsanctified force. But Zerubbabel and Jeshua must look at all the offers of assistance, and ask what their real value is; they must go into the sanctuary of motive, into the arcana of purpose and under-meanings. Zerubbabel and Jeshua—men who could undertake to build a city—were men who had mental penetration; they could see into other men. They saw into the Samaritan adversaries, and said,

"Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God" (v. 3).

That was not a friendly reply to a sympathetic approach; it was unmistakable, it was direct, it was complete. "Ye have nothing to do with us." That is the answer that we must make to men who want to co-operate with us externally before they have co-operated with us spiritually and sacrificially. That is the answer to infidels. When they would assist us in our works of benevolence and in spreading some particular practical aspect of religion, our reply should be, "Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God." The Church will take money from anybody; the whole Christian Church in all her ramifications and communions cheats herself into the persuasion that she can take the money of bad men and turn it to good uses. Grander would be the Church, more virgin in her beauty and loveliness, more snow-like in her incorruptibleness, if she could say to every bad man who offers her assistance, Ye have nothing to do with us in building the house of our God: the windows shall remain unglazed, and the roof-beams unslated, before we will touch money made by the sale of poison, or by practices that are marked by the utmost corruption and evil.

Thus we can learn from the Old Testament a good deal that would bear immediate modern application. This is the right answer to all doubtful Christians as well as to all unbelievers. We should say to them, So long as you are doubtful you are not helpful: your character is gone on one side, and therefore it is ineffective on the other. But would not this class of discipline and scope of criticism shear down the congregations? Certainly.

Would God they were shorn down. Every doubtful man amongst us is a loss, a source of weakness, a point of perplexity and vexation. We are only unanimous when we are one in moral faith and consent. The critic will do us no good; the clever man who sees our metaphysical error will keep us back: only the soul that has given itself to Christ out and out, in an unbargaining surrender, can really stand fire in the great war, and build through all weathers, and hope even in the midst of darkness. We may have too many people round about us; we may be overburdened and obstructed by numbers. The Church owes not a little of its strength to the purity of its discipline. But when a man comes forward and says he will assist us as far as he can; he cannot adopt our principles and doctrines, but he can do something towards helping us in external matters, should we not receive his help? Better, a thousand times better, if we could say to him, No, we are poor and few and socially of no account, but this is a holy work, and the hand that builds this house should be a hand wounded like its Master's. Beware of all approaches from the adversary. Let us never co-operate with men in doing anything for the Church, or for benevolent objects, who deny our Lord. We cannot work with the infidel for any great ecclesiastico-political object; his purpose and ours are not the same, and to ally ourselves with him would be to present a false aspect to the Christian public, and to Christ himself.

How did the adversaries take this rebuke? They took it as we might have anticipated—

"Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building" (v. 4).

All bad men can do work of that kind. What is so easy as to weaken a good man's hands? Nothing of a positively hostile nature need be done, but a look, a tone, an intimation that can neither be reported nor quoted nor set forth in type,—these may all tend to the purpose of enfeeblement. Who cannot trouble another man in his life-purpose? Ask a question about him, write an anonymous letter concerning him—and the man may be troubled, weakened, fretted, discomfited, and discouraged. Only in proportion as he sees God can he proceed with his work. Many a time the good man has said, Were not this work divine,

I should gladly retire from it; were not this preaching the Gospel a divine ordinance and a personal inspiration, I would rather cleanse the public streets than be associated with its official service, considering how many there are who oppose and vex and trouble the ministers of Christ. But we must look up and look on, and toil ever as in the great Taskmaster's eye. To thee, thou wounded, enthroned Christ, is this whole service rendered! We are not employed by one another; we are called to this blessed servitude, this gracious heavenly slavery, by him who will help us in every exigency and deliver us in every trouble. Even the weak have power to hinder. There lives not a cripple on all God's earth that cannot at least shake his crutch in the face of the good man. We must not be deterred thereby. We must have long secret interviews with God, and then go forth, saying, Come weal, come woe, there shall be no break in my testimony, there shall be no division in my consecrated love.

What more did the Samaritans do?* They appealed to an illegitimate king. The work was done "in the days of Artaxerxes." Let us be just to the men who bear this illustrious name. There were at least three of them; first, this man who was no king at all, but a Magian priest, who personated the son of the dead king, and came to the throne for something less than eight months. The historian says "in the days of Artaxerxes," not, "in the reign of." We know there are some men nominally kings who are not really royal. There are some men on all thrones who are personating other men. There are bastards even in the apostolic succession. Then there is an Artaxerxes of

* Among the remarkable dispensations of Providence recorded in this history, we may notice especially how wonderfully God inclined the hearts of several heathen princes, Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes, to favour and protect his people, and to aid them in the work of re-building their city and temple (i., iv., vi., vii.). Mark, too, how God overruled the opposition of the Samaritans, the decree of Darius being much more favourable than that of Cyrus (i., v., vi.). There is also another display of God's special and discriminating providence in fulfilment of his promises to his people. Whilst in the land of Samaria, colonies of strangers had been planted, which filled the territory of Israel with a heathen race, so as to prevent the return of the ancient inhabitants; it appears that, in the land of Judah, full room was left for the return and restoration of the Jews.—ANGUS's, *Bible Handbook.*

the seventh chapter of this book, a man quite of another temper and quality of mind. Then there is a third Artaxerxes in Nehemiah, gracious and kindly to the Jews. But the Samaritans, knowing probably that this Magian priest had put on the royal purple, and was sitting there king without any right to be there; and knowing, perhaps, that they could strip his purple rags from his shoulders, and send him out a beggar into the world, communicated with him, and received a letter from him. A copy of the letter sent to Artaxerxes is given here, and this is the base policy—

"Be it known now unto the king, that, if this city be builded, and the walls set up again, then will they not pay toll, tribute, and custom * and so thou shalt endamage the revenue of the kings †" (v. 13).

These were the men who offered in the second verse to assist in the building of this very city! How double some men are! How infinitely plural are other men! How many faces have some persons—more faces than there are days in the year! Who could have supposed that the second and thirteenth verses could have been in the same chapter? Who can estimate the vagaries of inconsistency, or trace the policy of venality, turpitude, and self-seeking? Was this appeal ever made again in sacred history? Can we recall an instance in the New Testament kindred to this? There should be no difficulty in quoting such an instance. Surely this is it: "If thou let this man go, thou art not Cæsar's friend"; and an appeal of that kind to a priest who only simulates his royalty, or to a procurator who has no knowledge of the real points in dispute, is likely to tell: the king says, I must be careful about toll, tribute, and custom; and particularly careful as other kings are coming after me, and I must not im-

* *The Speaker's Commentary* says: *Rather*, "tribute, provision, or toll." The "tribute" is the money-tax imposed on each province, and apportioned out to the inhabitants by the local authorities (Greek, φόρος); the "provision" is the payment in kind, which was an integral part of the Persian system (Herod. i. 192; iii. 91); the "toll" is probably a payment required from those who used the Persian highways.

† The word translated "revenue" here is not found elsewhere, and can only be conjecturally interpreted. Most modern commentators regard it as an adverb, meaning "at last," or "in the end." The entire clause may be best translated, "And so at last shall damage be done to the kings."—*Ibid.*

poverish them;—and the procurator would say, Cæsar must be honoured whoever goes down: crucify as many people as you please, only do not accuse me of disloyalty or high treason: I am Cæsar's friend; you can take what course you like. Such talk is even now in vogue. Anybody may go down, provided we keep up one particular phase of loyalty and consistency. Men are appealing to us saying, If this be done your sectarianism will be put an end to: if this action be completed, then all the devils in perdition will be let loose upon the land, and nothing but black ruin will stare the nation in the face; if you pursue this policy or that, then you are not Cæsar's friend. No matter how the appeal comes, it does come; we cannot always say, It will come in this form or come in that; but it would seem as if there was always a force at the heart, saying, If you do this, you will be disloyal, untrue; you will give false impressions to other people, and you will be involved in large collateral mischief. Always there comes from the blackness a messenger tapping at the door of our fear and saying, Let me in to tell thee that if thou dost thus, or so, or otherwise, great issues of an unpleasant character will certainly eventuate. What is the cure for all this? Inward conviction; solid purpose; a mind made up at the altar: then go straight forward, never being turned back by thunder, lightning, and rain, or by any form and measure of tempest, always pressing the waves, defying the enemy, and singing as we toil up the mountain.

For a time the bad Samaritans and the simulating priest succeeded. In the twenty-third verse we find that the men who went up to build the house of God were made "to cease by force and power." A pitiable record! Has it come, then, to a mere question of competitive muscle? The men were not made to cease because their convictions changed; they were overpowered, they were outnumbered; it was a triumph of brute strength. They never gave in so long as they could lift a hand, but when the foe was too many and too strong, then for some two years they ceased to build. But they were building all the time in their hearts; the purpose of building was never surrendered. So it must be with us: our trade has gone down, our friends have cooled, the patronage that used to encourage us has been

withdrawn, the enemy is very strong, the competition is overwhelming, and for a time we must give up: but, blessed be God, only for a time: Haggai the prophet is soon coming, and Zechariah, and when the right prophets come mind will triumph over matter, a sound doctrine will depose a rotten policy, and holy consecrated speech shall make men's blood tingle with unexpected and uncalculated life, which, being properly regulated and set to work, shall yet see the house of God reared, roofed, completed, and shining like a light at midnight. Blessed are they who have part in such services! The discouragements are very many; sometimes our tears blind us; sometimes our hearts grow cold within us through very discouragement, and we say we have been victimised by a fanaticism, we have mistaken our vocation, we were not called to this ministry at all. The Holy Book seems to be inverted when we read it, so that we cannot make coherence or poetry of it; and the very altar seems to dissolve in ashes when we bow before it that we may pray; bad men have all their own way; the devil succeeds, he is rich, and he seems to lay his avaricious hands upon all things: let us give up. Then comes a voice, saying, No: ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin; look unto Jesus, the author and finisher of faith; put your trust in the living God; they that be for you are more than all that can be against you,—wait; sorrow may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning: men go forth sowing, bearing precious seed, and they come again bearing sheaves, rejoicing and shouting for very gladness of heart—hope: night cometh truly, but also the morning. What a morning when heaven dawns!

Ezra v.

1. Then the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo [the prophecies of these writers should be read at this point], prophesied unto the Jews that were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, even unto them.

2. Then rose up [being inspired and excited] Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and began to build the house of God which is at Jerusalem: and with them were the prophets of God helping them.

3. ¶ At the same time came to them Tatnai, governor [of the entire province of Syria and Phœnicia] on this side the river, and Shethar-Boznai, and their companions, and said thus unto them, Who hath commanded you to build this house, and to make up this wall? [the work had been resumed before the decree had been annulled].

4. Then said we unto them after this manner, What are the names of the men [the chief promoters] that make this building? [not a question but a statemen].

5. But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, that they could not cause them to cease, till the matter came to Darius: and then they returned answer by letter concerning this matter.

6. ¶ The copy of the letter that Tatnai, governor on this side the river, and Shethar-Boznai, and his companions the Apharsachites [some kind of Persian guard], which were on this side the river, sent unto Darius the king:

7. They sent a letter [remarkable for dispassionateness and good faith] unto him, wherein was written thus; Unto Darius the king, all peace.

8. Be it known unto the king, that we went into the province of Judea, to the house of the great God [showing reverence], which is builded with great stones, and timber is laid in the walls [of the temple, not the city], and this work goeth fast on, and prospereth in their hands.

9. Then asked we those elders, and said unto them thus, Who commanded you to build this house, and to make up these walls?

10. We asked their names also, to certify thee, that we might write the names of the men that were the chief of them.

11. And thus they returned us answer, saying, We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and build the house that was builded these many years ago, which a great king of Israel builded and set up.

12. But after that our fathers had provoked the God of heaven unto wrath, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house, and carried the people away into Babylon.

13. But in the first year of Cyrus the king of Babylon the same king Cyrus made a decree to build this house of God.

14. And the vessels also of gold and silver of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that was in Jerusalem, and brought them into the temple of Babylon, those did Cyrus the king take out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered unto one, whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor;

15. And said unto him, Take these vessels, go, carry them into the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be builded in his place.

16. Then came the same Sheshbazzar, and laid the foundation of the house of God which is in Jerusalem: and since that time even until now hath it been in building, and yet it is not finished.

17. Now therefore, if it seem good to the king, let there be search made [all depended on the original decree] in the king's treasure-house, which is there at Babylon, whether it be so, that a decree was made of Cyrus the king to build this house of God at Jerusalem, and let the king send his pleasure to us concerning this matter.

Ezra vi.

1. Then Darius the king made a decree [gave an order], and search was made in the house of the rolls [writings], where the treasures were laid up [in a chamber for the storing of documents and other treasures] in Babylon.

2. And there was found at Achmetha [the Median capital of Cyrus], in the palace that is in the province of the Medes, a [parchment] roll, and therein was a record thus written:

3. In the first year of Cyrus the king, the same Cyrus the king made a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be builded, the place where they offered [may offer] sacrifices, and let the foundations thereof be strongly laid; the height thereof threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof threescore cubits [is this a reference to the day of small things?];

4. With three rows [some say storeys] of great stones, and a row of new timber: and let the expences be given out of the king's house [the Persian revenue]:

5. And also let the golden and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which is at Jerusalem, and brought unto Babylon, be restored, and brought again unto the temple which is at Jerusalem, every one to his place, and place them in the house of God [thus expiating the sin of Belshazzar (Dan. v.)].

6. Now therefore, Tatnai, governor beyond the river, Shethar-Boznai, and your companions the Apharsachites, which are beyond the river, be ye far from thence [keep aloof from any kind of interference]:

7. Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in his place.

8. Moreover I make a decree what ye shall do to the elders of these Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king's goods, even of the

tribute beyond the river, forthwith expences be given unto these men, that they be not hindered.

9. And that which they have need of, both young bullocks, and rams, and lambs, for the burnt offerings for the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil [see details in Exodus xxix. 40, and Lev. ii. 13], according to the appointment [direction] of the priests which are at Jerusalem, let it be given them day by day without fail:

10. That they may offer sacrifices of sweet savours [incense] unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king [Jer. xxix. 7], and of his sons.

11. Also I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word [violate this command or decision], let timber be pulled down from his house, and being set up [the beam, not the man], let him be hanged [crucified] thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this [*rather*, let his house be confiscated].

12. And the God that hath caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed.

13. ¶ Then Tatnai, governor on this side the river, Shethar-Boznai, and their companions, according to that which Darius the king had sent, so they did speedily.

14. And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxse king of Persia.

15. And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar [March], which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king [the day of the last month of the ecclesiastical year].

16. ¶ And the children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God, with joy,

17. And offered at the dedication of this house of God an hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs; and for a sin offering for all Israel, twelve he-goats [a modest offering, and adapted to the day of small things], according to the number of the tribes of Israel.

18. And they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses, for the service of God, which is at Jerusalem; as it is written in the book of Moses.

19. And the children of the captivity kept the passover upon the fourteenth day of the first month.

20. For the priests and the Levites were purified together [were all of them pure], all of them were pure, and killed the passover for all [a practice which commenced at the great passover of Hezekiah] the children of the captivity, and for their brethren the priests, and for themselves.

21. And the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel, did eat,

22. And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the Lord had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria ["the king of Persia is so called as a remembrancer of their oppression by his forerunners"] unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

PROPHETS AND BUILDERS.

THE prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah ought to be read in connection with this portion of the history. The two prophets were more definite in their conception of the apathy which had fallen among the people than Ezra appears to have been. In connection with the second verse let us notice the double action of prophecy and building. Zerubbabel and Jeshua began to build concurrently with the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah. It is a common delusion that speaking is not attended with practical results; that is to say, that the mere gift of speech may be exercised for purely selfish purposes or for the expression of frivolous or useless sentiment. This, however, would be simply an abuse of speech, for speech in the estimate of God and earnest men is but an instrument by which practical results are assured, or at least their adoption is considerably facilitated. The prophet and the builder must always go hand in hand. It is noticeable that the builder seldom or never goes first, but invariably succeeds the intelligent and ardent speaker. This is only another way of saying that thought precedes action. When men think deeply they are preparing the way for laying massive foundations by persons who could not themselves have entered into such intellectual strife. The one must not despise the other. Haggai built nothing, nor did Zechariah probably lay stone upon stone; on the other hand, Zerubbabel may not have been a man of active thought, and Jeshua may not have been gifted with eloquence; but they all worked together—the first man, seeing the truth of God and feeling the burden of the zeal of heaven, excited the sentiment of the two, that they might proceed to give practical and visible effect to the noble prophecies dictated by the Spirit. It is in vain for hearers to complain of preachers when they themselves are not prepared to carry out the word of the Lord. If hearers were of the spirit of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, every sermon, however poor in its merely intellectual characteristics, would lead to build-

ing—that is, to some form of edification, either personal, domestic, or social; if, on the other hand, hearers wish simply to be pleased, to enjoy intellectual animation, or to have the fancy titillated and gratified, no matter who the prophets may be the prophecies will be wholly lost upon them; even Haggai and Zechariah might have sown seed on stony ground, or thrown it amongst thorns; happily in their instance the hearers were prepared to listen, and having listened were inspired to give practical effect to the holy doctrine which had satisfied their understanding and warmed their heart.

"But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, that they could not cause them to cease, till the matter came to Darius: and then they returned answer by letter concerning this matter" (v. 5).

Divine fear explains all holiest and noblest action. If Zerubbabel and Jeshua had not felt that the eye of the Lord was upon them, they could not have continued their work in the face of opposition so relentless and overwhelming. We are in relation to our work what we are in relation to God himself. If we look up to God with steadfastness of attention, and regard him as the one great taskmaster and lawgiver, our courage will be more than equal to all the demands that are made upon it, for we shall work not in our own strength, but in the strength of almightiness: if, on the other hand, we look at ourselves and then look at the enemy, contrasting the several resources, we shall infallibly suffer the extinction of our courage, and betake ourselves to the miserable humiliation of conscious insufficiency and defeat. The great thing always to be done is to keep the religious enthusiasm of the heart at full heat. Once let a man feel that God is near him, ever within him and round about him, and that whatsoever he does expresses the wisdom and power of God, and he cannot quail before any disadvantages, how threatening or overwhelming soever;—even if these disadvantages lead to momentary defeat, the consolation will be that the defeat is but momentary, being of a nature, indeed, such as to re-kindle the courage which has been temporarily thrown into dismay. The Church has unhappily been too prone to consider that all her progress depended upon her scholarship, her genius, her eloquence; she has been disposed to number her people and to add up her

resources, and to take encouragement simply from the schedules which she has been able to set before her own imagination, as representing her available strength; she has forgotten to put God as her refuge, and to regard him as involving in his omnipotence all other resources. The Church should live and move and have her being in God. The eye of the enemy and the eye of God are continually upon us in all the work of life. It is indeed difficult for poor human nature to exclude from its consciousness the fact that it is being watched by the adversary. After all, we are in the flesh, and are exposed to all the assaults which are associated with the kind of being which now limits us; our physical force runs down; our temperament is subjected to the influences of cold and wind; our social circumstances continually undergo modification; and in a thousand ways we are made to feel that we are set in array against infinite disadvantages. What wonder then if now and again we should feel not only cast down but almost destroyed? On the other hand, we are continually exhorted to fasten our faith upon God; to look unto the hills whence cometh our help; to remember that the battle is not ours but God's; and to say, in tones of triumph, If God be for us, who can be against us? they that be with us are more than they that are against us: we shall be more than conquerors through Christ who loved us;—and that is the spirit which is to keep up a continual war against the surrendering and seductive flesh. But who is sufficient for these things? Who can build when the sword of the enemy is suspended above his head, or is felt to be closely behind him, or pointed at his very breast? It was not easy building in the days of Ezra; the whole air seemed to be charged with opposition against the Jews who sought to re-erect the city, the temple, or the altar. We know nothing about opposition in our own day—at least, opposition of an official and persecuting character. It may be, however, that only the form of persecution and not the spirit has been done away. There is such a thing as moral opposition, internal persecution, suffering which the heart alone knows or comprehends—a mysterious opposition, as if the very prince of the power of the air followed us, waited for the return of our weakness, and sprang upon us when our heart was failing within us. It is under such circumstances that we are made to see what our own spiritual quality is. We are not in

reality simply what we are on a summer morning, or in the day of prosperity, or as we stand in the midst of the golden harvest-field, every stroke of the sickle bringing riches to our feet; we are in reality what we feel ourselves to be in the dark night, in the hour of trouble, in the fury of the storm, in the peril of the sea; nothing can sustain our poor human nature under such circumstances but the certainty that God's eye is upon us, and that the eye which is light to us is a destructive fire to our enemies. Our religious consciousness is the measure of our ability and our enthusiasm in service.

"And thus they returned us answer, saying, We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and build the house that was builded these many years ago, which a great king of Israel builded and set up. But after that our fathers had provoked the God of heaven unto wrath, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house, and carried the people away into Babylon. But in the first year of Cyrus the king of Babylon the same king Cyrus made a decree to build this house of God. And the vessels also of gold and silver of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that was in Jerusalem, and brought them into the temple of Babylon, those did Cyrus the king take out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered unto one, whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor; and said unto him, Take these vessels, go, carry them into the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be builded in his place Then came the same Sheshbazzar, and laid the foundation of the house of God which is in Jerusalem: and since that time even until now hath it been in building, and yet it is not finished" (v. 11-16).

The historical answer to all opposition is invariably the best. The Jews here took their stand upon history, and gave a noble answer to their assailants and opponents. It is noticeable that the Jews always seemed to have a comprehensive view of the history which lay behind them. They went back to the beginning with certainty, and traced the whole providential line most distinctly and vividly, thus always keeping memory and imagination abreast with the facts on which they relied as proofs of the divine election and rule. In recounting their history they never forgot the errors of their fathers, yea, the sins and iniquities which their fathers had committed against high heaven. "But after that our fathers had provoked the God of heaven unto wrath, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house, and carried the people away into

Babylon." Yet, though the iniquities were many, though the perversity was most stubborn and ungovernable, there would seem to be in the people of God themselves a seed which could not be totally destroyed: they were handed over to oppression and cruel chastisement, yet they were never utterly forgotten; their names were not erased from the palms of the divine hands. The Jews did not regard iniquity as separating them entirely from the mercy and love of God. They committed iniquity with a high hand, and there were times when they seemed even to defy the majesty of heaven; but having run their evil course, and tested the vanity of their own imagination and the deceitfulness of their spiritual enemy, they returned to God with strong crying and tears and brokenheartedness, and he was ever heard of them, and he ever gave them reason to say, his mercy endureth for ever. The Christian ought also to fall back upon his history when he is opposed by the sceptic, and when he is defied by the evil-minded man. Christianity is more than an intellectual argument; it is a solid and provable history. The one thing above all others which Christianity can establish beyond all doubt is the personality of Jesus Christ the Son of God. Christ stands in history without any man disputing that he lived and taught substantially as we find his career traced in the four Evangelists. John Stuart Mill himself has said, "Let rational criticism take from us what it may, it still leaves us the Christ." Christians may not be able to defend Christianity in its metaphysical or argumentative aspects, but they can always fall back upon the life of the Lord; they can remind themselves of the purity of his motive, the simplicity of his character, the beneficence of his disposition, and the amazing and unparalleled self-sacrifice which makes him king amongst the sons of men. This is the perpetual and the complete defence of which the humblest Christian may avail himself. When the storm of argument has ceased, when the battle of controversial attack has quieted down, the Christian can go to the four Evangelists, and read the simple and holy story over again, and by its perusal can re-establish his faith and rekindle his hope. Let us be careful how we attempt to answer argument by argument, when we may easily overwhelm all opposition by the simple facts of history.

"Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in the house of the rolls, where the treasures were laid up in Babylon" (vi. i).

When we read that Darius "made a decree," we are simply to understand that he gave an order. Truth has everything to hope from wise and rigorous search. Darius was anxious to make himself acquainted with the facts of the case, and therefore he insisted that all the papers should be produced, that he might peruse them for himself or have them perused by a reliable authority. The result of the search was the discovery of a record—

"In the first year of Cyrus the king the same Cyrus the king made a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be builded, the place where they offered sacrifices, and let the foundations thereof be strongly laid; the height thereof threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof threescore cubits; with three rows of great stones,* and a row of new timber, and let the expences be given out of the king's house: and also let the golden and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which is at Jerusalem, and brought unto Babylon, be restored, and brought again unto the temple which is at Jerusalem, every one to his place, and place them in the house of God" (vi. 3–5).

Darius having discovered the record his policy lay plainly revealed before him,—

"Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in his place. Moreover, I make a decree what ye shall do to the elders of these Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king's goods, even of the tribute beyond the river, forthwith expences be given unto these men, that they be not hindered" (vi. 7, 8).

And so the king wrote clearly and distinctly, and opened a way for the further progress and final consummation of the idea which the Jews had set themselves to realise—"I, Darius, have made a

* The word translated "row" occurs only in this passage. The meaning is uncertain. Fritzche regards it as a "course," and supposes that, in the building of the walls, after every three courses of stone there followed a course of timber. Mr. Fergusson accepts the Septuagint rendering (δόμος) as giving the true sense, and understands three "storeys" of stone, with a fourth "storey" of woodwork on the summit. He compares the three storeys of chambers in the temple of Solomon (1 Kings vi. 5, 6). To the writer of this note it seems most probable that Cyrus intended to limit the *thickness* of the walls, which were not to exceed a breadth of three rows of stone, with an inner wooden wainscoting.—*The Speaker's Commentary.*

decree; let it be done with speed." This came of searching into the records of the case. Christians also must conduct a process of searching; they, too, have papers which they must duly and critically peruse. Christianity, however, does not make its appeal wholly to papers. Christ says, "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me." Christ himself began at Moses, and continuing his search throughout the whole of the scriptures, found himself everywhere as the object of prophecy and the hope of the world. Jesus Christ always insisted that if men believed the writings of Moses they would also credit his own words, on the ground that Moses wrote of him. Searching amongst papers, therefore, is the duty of all Christian students; but there is a deeper search still which must be exacted. We have to search into human instincts to find out from the mysterious action of human nature what it is that man most wants. We have indeed to interpret instincts to reason, to give them their fit expression, and to show all they mean by their dumb yearnings and prophesyings. We have also to search into the whole scheme of moral mysteries,—the mysteries of providence, the mysteries of thought, the mysteries of hope, and the mysteries of suffering: we must pray that our eyes may be anointed with eye-salve that we may see the real meaning of these mysteries, and be able to read them in all their definiteness to those who inquire concerning the building of the universe and the purpose of its institution. We may also read the bolder and clearer history of the triumphs which Christianity has achieved in the world. Our missionary records must be brought to the front: they will tell what countries were before the introduction of Christianity, and they will prove to us what the countries have been after Christianity has been received, understood, and put into practice. Such practical arguments are always available to the Christian. There can be no dispute about such facts as these: the countries are accessible, the missionaries are living witnesses, the facts are strewn upon every hand, and it will be for those who oppose Christianity to account for its moral successes. If Christianity were a mere argument—that is to say, were it only an intellectual appeal—then all that it has reported itself as having done might be quite disputable; but when it appeals to life, to actual and provable circumstances, it is but

decent, not to say just, that the effect should be traced to the proper cause, and that Christ should have credit given to him for making all things new. What we say to every man who opposes the Christian cause is, Peruse the papers: consider the instincts of human nature; deeply ponder the mysteries which characterise human experience, and look without prejudice at the facts which Christian missions have established, and then come to your own conclusion as to the Divine origin of the Christian religion.

"And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the Lord had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel" (vi. 22).

Then came joy. The children of Israel had come out of captivity, and those who had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land sought the Lord God of Israel, and did eat their bread with religious thankfulness. The joy was very great during the feast of unleavened bread; for seven days the song of joy never ceased: for the Lord himself had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel. The one joy of the true saint is to build God's house. The building of that house is not limited to stone and wood: in human hearts we build God's house, so that the life is renewed, and the whole outlook and purpose of existence are brought under the influence of regeneration. God's house is also builded in public policies, so that politics can no longer be regarded as the game of adventurers, but as the science of social existence. The house of God, too, may be built in families, so that the father and the mother and all the children and every member of the household may be as living stones built up into a holy edifice, reared for the habitation of God. The house of the Lord may also be built in commerce, so that business shall no longer be a strife of the strong against the weak, a foolish competition, an ambition for that which is vain, ostentatious, and spiritually useless; commerce itself should become the means of honestly obtaining bread, and living a useful life, even within the limits of so-called earthly circumstances. Woe betide us when we imagine that politics and commerce cannot be sanctified, or when we regard them as mere instruments for the attainment of selfish

purposes or the gratification of selfish wishes. Too long have we supposed that religion must be confined to buildings which we denominate by sacred terms, and to days which are set apart for the observance of certain ceremonies. Christianity has done nothing for us until it has cleansed the family circle, rekindled the family fire, set up a family altar, passed into the market-places, cleansing and renewing all commercial relations and standards; and passing into politics, there subduing the spirit of selfishness by the spirit of love, the spirit of party by the spirit of patriotism. We shall lose much of holy meaning and holy stimulus if we suppose that building the house of the Lord relates to the putting-up of the four-cornered building, the roofing-in of a mere locality,—it means the setting-up of great principles, the erection of standards of righteousness, the proclamation of words of incorruptible purity, and the elevation of the whole level of human thinking and human sentiment. Who will take part in this holy edification? Each man can bring a stone to the building, but he can do this only in proportion as he himself is a living stone in the living temple. Long persecution we may have, great discouragement may fall upon us; at times we may be inclined to abandon the work, for we cannot see in the darkness, and we are no match for the resources that are arrayed against us. Under such depressing influences we must grope for the altar, and there with tender heart plead with God that our hope may be brought back again, and that we may be able with steadfastness and loyalty to himself to do what we can to put up the temple which he himself will accept as his dwelling-place.

ANNOTATED TEXT.

Chapter vii.

1. Now [fifty-seven years] after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah [the eminent high priest who last ministered in Solomon's temple, and was slain at Riblah], the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah. . . .

6. This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all his requests, according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him.

7. And there went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, and the Levites, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, unto Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king.

8. And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king.

9. For upon the first day of the first month began he to go up from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him [the direct distance of Babylon from Jerusalem is about five hundred miles].

10. For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments [*lit.* law and right].

11. ¶ Now this is the copy of the letter that the king Artaxerxes gave unto Ezra the priest, the scribe, even a scribe of the words of the commandments of the Lord, and of his statutes to Israel [in the case of Ezra the function of scribe was more important than that of priest].

12. Artaxerxes, king of kings [a title inherited from the Babylonians], unto Ezra the priest, a scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace, and at such a time [a salutation is implied].

13. I make a decree, that all they of the people of Israel, and of his [their] priests and Levites, in my realm, which are minded of their own free will to go up to Jerusalem, go with thee.

14. Forasmuch as thou art sent of the king, and of his seven counsellors, to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of thy God which is in thine hand [implying deep reverence];

15. And to carry the silver and gold, which the king and his counsellors have freely offered unto the God of Israel, whose habitation is in Jerusalem,

16. And all the silver and gold that thou canst find in all the province of Babylon, with the freewill offering of the people, and of the priests [Jewish], offering willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem:

17. That thou mayest buy speedily with this money bullocks, rams, lambs, with their meat-offerings and their drink-offerings, and offer them upon the

altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem [this was dictated by Ezra].

18. And whatsoever shall seem good to thee, and to thy brethren, to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, that do after the will of your God.

19. The vessels also that are given thee for the service of the house of thy God, those deliver thou before the God of Jerusalem.

20. And whatsoever more shall be needful for the house of thy God, which thou shalt have occasion to bestow, bestow it out of the king's treasure-house.

21. And I, even I Artaxerxes the king, do make a decree to all the treasurers which are beyond the river, that whatsoever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, shall require of you, it be done speedily [the next is a qualifying verse],

22. Unto an hundred talents of silver [amounting to £24,000 sterling], and to an hundred measures of wheat, and to an hundred baths of wine, and to an hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much [salt was plentiful near the Dead Sea].

23. Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven: for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons [probably eighteen in number]?

24. Also we certify you, that touching any of the priests and Levites, singers, porters, Nethinims, or ministers of this house of God, it shall not be lawful to impose toll, tribute, or custom, upon them.

25. And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that is in thine hand, set magistrates and judges, which may judge all the people that are beyond the river, all such as know the laws of thy God; and teach ye them that know them not [to supersede Persian rule over the Jews].

26. And whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him [civil authority is added to religious], whether it be unto death, or to banishment [rooting out], or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment.

27. ¶ Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers [the solitary expression of Ezra's private devotion], which hath put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem:

28. And hath extended mercy unto me before the king, and his counsellors, and before all the king's mighty princes. [Here the language changes from Chaldee to Hebrew, and continues so to the close of the book.] And I was strengthened as the hand of the Lord my God was upon me, and I gathered together out of Israel chief men to go up with me.

Chapter viii.

15. ¶ And I gathered them together to the river that runneth to Ahava [Ahava was both a town and a river]; and there abode we in tents three days: and I viewed the people, and the priests, and found there none of the sons of Levi [only seventy-four had returned with Zerubbabel].

16. Then sent I for Eliezer, for Ariel, for Shemaiah, and for Elnathan, and for Jarib, and for Elnathan, and for Nathan, and for Zechariah, and for Meshullam, chief men; also for Joiarib, and for Alnathan, men of understanding [teachers or priests].

17. And I sent them with commandment unto Iddo the chief at the place Casiphia, and I told them what they should say unto Iddo, and to his brethren the Nethinims, at the place Casiphia, that they should bring unto us ministers [a general term including Levites and Nethinims] for the house of our God.

18. And by the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of understanding, of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel; and Sherebiah, with his sons and his brethren, eighteen:

19. And Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiah of the sons of Merari, his brethren and their sons, twenty;

20. Also of the Nethinims, whom David and the princes had appointed [the only place in which the fact is noticed] for the service of the Levites, two hundred and twenty Nethinims: all of them were expressed by name.

21. ¶ Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us [as the wilderness was now before them], and for our little ones [showing that the whole household went up], and for all our substance [principally the treasures for the temple].

22. For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him.

23. So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was intreated of us.

24. ¶ Then I separated twelve of the chief of the priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their brethren with them,

25. And weighed unto them the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, even the offering of the house of our God, which the king, and his counsellors, and his lords, and all Israel there present had offered:

26. I even weighed unto their hand six hundred and fifty talents of silver, and silver vessels an hundred talents, and of gold an hundred talents [according to the best computation, the silver would amount to a quarter of a million sterling, and the gold to about three-quarters of a million];

27. Also twenty basons of gold, of a thousand drams [worth rather more than a thousand guineas]; and two vessels of fine copper, precious as gold.

28. And I said unto them, Ye are holy unto the Lord [consecrated treasures in consecrated hands]; the vessels are holy also; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering unto the Lord God of your fathers.

29. Watch ye, and keep them, until ye weigh them before the chief of the priests and the Levites, and chief of the fathers of Israel, at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the Lord.

30. So took the priests and the Levites the weight of the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem unto the house of our God.

31. ¶ Then we departed from the river Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go unto Jerusalem: and the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way [a summary of the journey].

32. And we came to Jerusalem, and abode there three days [in rest].

33. ¶ Now on the fourth day was the silver and the gold and the vessels

weighed in the house of our God by the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest; and with him was Eleazar the son of Phineas; and with them was Jozabad the son of Jeshua, and Noadiah the son of Binnui, Levites;

34. By number and by weight of every one: and all the weight was written at that time.

35. Also the children of those that had been carried away, which were come out of the captivity, offered burnt offerings unto the God of Israel, twelve bullocks for all Israel, ninety and six rams, seventy and seven lambs, twelve he-goats for a sin-offering: all this was a burnt offering unto the Lord.

36. ¶ And they delivered the king's commissions unto the king's lieutenants, and to the governors on this side the river; and they furthered the people, and the house of God.

Chapter ix.

1. Now when these things were done, the princes [native rulers of Jerusalem] came to me, saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations [*rather*, as it regards their abominations], even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.

2. For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass [the upper classes were the worst].

3. And when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle [betokening his horror and grief], and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonied.

4. Then were assembled unto me every one that trembled [in fear of the divine judgments] at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those that had been carried away; and I sat [before the temple] astonied until the evening sacrifice.

5. ¶ And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the Lord my God,

6. And said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens.

7. Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to a spoil, and to confusion of face, as it is this day.

8. And now for a little [the word *little* is here emphatic] space grace hath been shewed from the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place [the temple itself was a sure nail], that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little [emphatic as before] reviving in our bondage.

9. For we were [are] bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our

bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall [a figure expressive of security] in Judah and in Jerusalem.

10. And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken thy commandments,

11. Which thou hast commanded by thy servants the prophets, saying, The land, unto which ye go to possess it, is an unclean land with the filthiness of the people of the lands, with their abominations, which have filled it from one end to another with their uncleanness.

12. Now, therefore, give not your daughters [Deut. vii. 3] unto their sons, neither take their daughters unto your sons, nor seek their peace or their wealth for ever: that ye may be strong, and eat the good of the land, and leave it for an inheritance to your children for ever.

13. And after all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, and for our great trespass, seeing that thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us such deliverance as this;

14. Should we again break thy commandments, and join in affinity with the people of these abominations? Wouldest not thou be angry with us till thou hadst consumed us, so that there should be no remnant nor escaping?

15. O Lord God of Israel, thou art righteous; for we remain yet escaped, as it is this day: behold, we are before thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before thee because of this.

Chapter x.

1. Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down [in public prostration] before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore [the calamity was domestic as well as national].

2. And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said unto Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing.

3. Now, therefore, let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my Lord [*should be*, The Lord; the reference is not to Ezra], and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.

4. Arise, for this matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee; be of good courage, and do it.

5. Then arose Ezra, and made the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel, to swear that they should do according to this word. And they sware.

6. ¶ Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib: and when he came thither, he did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away.

7. And they made proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem unto all

the children of the captivity, that they should gather themselves together unto Jerusalem;

8. And that whosoever would not come within three days [no town was more than forty miles distant], according to the counsel [so there can be no charge of arbitrariness] of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be forfeited, and himself separated from the congregation of those that had been carried away.

9. ¶ Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered themselves together unto Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month [December, the rainy month in Palestine], and the twentieth day of the month; and all the people sat in the street [open court] of the house of God, trembling because of this matter, and for the great rain.

10. And Ezra the priest [not merely a political commissioner] stood up, and said unto them, Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel.

11. Now therefore make confession unto the Lord God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives.

12. Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As thou hast said, so must we do.

13. But the people are many, and it is a time of much rain, and we are not able to stand without, neither is this a work of one day or two: for we are many [we have greatly offended in this thing] that have transgressed in this thing.

14. Let now our rulers of all the congregation stand [as a representative body in session], and let all them which have taken strange wives in our cities come at appointed times, and with them the elders of every city, and the judges thereof, until the fierce wrath of our God for this matter be turned from us.

15. ¶ Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jehaziah the son of Tikvah were employed about this matter, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite helped them.

16. And the children of the captivity did so. And Ezra the priest, with certain chief of the fathers, after the house of their fathers, and all of them by their names, were separated, and sat down [held a session] in the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter.

17. And they made an end with all the men that had taken strange wives by the first day of the first month.

THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, prepare us to take part in the anthem that is to be sung in the upper and better world. Prepare us as thou wilt for that high music: by impoverishment, trial, fire, disappointment,—as thou wilt, not as we will, but may the outcome of the whole process and endurance be the anthem, the music of heaven. We bless thee that sometimes we have sung and cried both at once: we know what it is to be joyful even with tears, and we know that thy purpose concerning us is that we should all be parts of thy great household—no wanderer lost, no poor soul outside at last, but everyone, great and small, within the enclosure so vast, so strong, even thine own heaven. May thy word come to us now and then, to-day and to-morrow, as a persuasion and a welcome, a cry calling us home, a promise of forgiveness, a pledge and covenant of sonship. What we are, thou knowest—how far we are real or unreal, true or false, sincere or hypocritical—thou knowest the outside and the inside, the conduct and the motive. Search us and try us, and see if there be any wicked way in us, and lead us in the way everlasting. There is not a thought in our heart, there is not a word on our tongue, but lo! O Lord, it is known unto thee altogether. May we live in this temperament; may we work under the inspiration and the holy awe of this sacred feeling; may we thus render unto thee our lives a daily sacrifice, a continual oblation, and may our worthiness be found not in ourselves but in the infinite merits of the Son of God. Amen.

Chapter i.

"The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hachaliah" (v. 1).

THE MESSAGE TO NEHEMIAH.

WHAT should we imagine was coming from such an opening of a book? We should naturally suppose that we were about to hear an ordinary narrative—to listen to the contemplations and reflections of a literary man. He is simply about to say something—he promises nothing more than words—

yet out of this very simple and humble beginning we have one of the most remarkable stories of activity that can be found in any writing. Words are more than we think—everything depends on the speaker. To some persons life appears to be only an affair of words, syllables, empty utterances—that is to say, they are people who must talk: they have a good deal to say about nothing, and they say nothing about it, and their life is thus summed up as mere gabblers and gossips, speakers without a speech, words with no battles behind them. These, however, are the words of Nehemiah, the governor of Judah and Jerusalem. When such a man speaks, he means to do something—his purpose is always practical, but he thinks it needful to lay down a good strong basis of explanation, that people may understand clearly why he began to work and upon what principles he proceeded.

Nehemiah lived in a very wonderful time. If we could have called together into one great council all the great men who lived within the eighty years which were the measure of Nehemiah's own life, we should have had one of the most wonderful councils that ever assembled under heaven. There is Nehemiah in the middle; yonder is Æschylus writing his tragedies in Athens; Democritus elaborating a philosophy whose atomism and materialism are coming up as the originalities of our own day; Aristophanes elaborating his wonderful comedies; Herodotus writing his gossipy history, and Thucydides writing a history marked by much majesty. And bring also into this symposium Plato and Socrates and other of the most notable men that ever led the civilised world—they were all living within that same span of eighty years, yet what different lives they were pursuing! The words of the comedy-writer were words only; the words of the great tragic composer were only words—with a keener accent, however; but the words of Nehemiah meant strife, contention, the assertion of right, patriotism, battle—if need be, the reclamation of a lost cause, the leading of a forlorn hope. What do our words mean? Do we purpose to carry out our words? Are they words that culminate in covenants, or mere empty syllables used for jangling in the air? If we did but know it, a word should have blood in it—a word should be part of our innermost heart; a word should be

a bond; a saying should be a seal; an utterance should be a pledge made sacred with all the resources and all the responsibilities of life.

"And it came to pass [*rather*, Now it came to pass] in the month Chisleu [the ninth month, corresponding to the end of November and beginning of December (see Zech. vii. 1)], in the twentieth year [*i.e.* of Artaxerxes (comp. ch. ii. 1)], as I was in Shushan the palace" [comp. Ezek. i. 2, 5, etc.; Dan. viii. 2. Shushan, or Susa, was the ordinary residence of the Persian kings. "The palace," or acropolis, was a distinct quarter of the city, occupying an artificial eminence] (v. 1).

It was in the very grey December time that the message came. It was about our midwinter that the messenger arrived in Persia. How does it come that we set down some days as the beginning of other dates? We call them red-letter days—they are memorable points in our poor changing story. 'Twas the day when your mother died; 'twas the day when the poor little child had that serious accident which threatened its life; 'twas that crisis in your commercial affairs when you did not know but that the morrow would find you a beggar; 'twas just as you were pulling your foot out of that pit of long affliction which you thought would have swallowed you up; and you date from these occurrences, landmarks, memorable points, eras in your story. And Nehemiah never could forget that December day when Hanani came, and he asked him that all-important question we are now about to consider.

"Hanani, one of my brethren [comp. ch. vii. 2. Hanani seems to have been an actual brother of Nehemiah], came [*i.e.* arrived at Susa from Jerusalem], he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem" (v. 2).

What do we know of Hanani? History is full of nobodies. The story of human life is a story of obscurities. It is the nobodies that create the renown of the great men, and yet the great men treat the nobodies as so many mats on which to wipe their feet. Hanani was a very ordinary man—historically viewed he is indeed nowhere. This is probably about the only occasion upon which his name occurs, and yet that man brought a torch and set fire to a nobler life; and that is what we may do: we

can relate the difficulty of things to greater men than ourselves—we can drop a story into their ears, we can tell what we have seen and heard and felt and experienced. We know not to whom we are speaking, and no man can measure the full effect of his own words. If, therefore, we are nobodies in ourselves, yet if we confine our attention to those things we know, we are powerful in proportion as we keep within the limit of knowledge. A weak man, an intellectually weak man, keeping himself within the line of facts which he can personally attest, is more powerful than a far nobler intellect than his own, that is prone to overstep its own boundaries, and to trespass upon fields whose entrance is forbidden. The difficulty with some people is this—that they will not tell a plain straightforward tale of facts. They are not unwilling to go to a meeting and recite verses of somebody else's poetry, and that they call contributing a quota to the entertainment. If you would simply tell the plain straightforward history of your own heart, you would find that assemblies would melt under your pathos. "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin." What do you know about the great truths that gather round the name of Christ? What have you felt of the power of the gospel? What have been your resources and defences in the day of temptation? How did you answer the devil when he fell back before you, blanched and vanquished? If you would tell these things you would be amongst the best preachers—speaking naturally, pathetically, really, tenderly, and many a man, far greater than you are, personally, might be set aflame from your simple saying.

Let the young man take a hint from that fact. Where you can, drop a word: if it is only one word so much the better. Rest assured of this—let me fall back on no authority that may not have grown out of my own varied experience—that it is better to speak one word than to speak a hundred. Keep within your own knowledge, as the poor man did whose eyes had been recovered. There were decoy-ducks that wanted to lead him off into fields adjacent, and he said, "No, no." They said, "We do not know who this man is who has cured your eyes (we say apparently, we do not say really), we never heard of him, he does not belong to our sect, he is not a member of our club, he

is not marked with our chalk—we do not know this fellow." He said, "Why, here is a marvellous thing, that ye know not whence he is, and yet he hath opened mine eyes! Whether he be a sinner or not, I know not; one thing I know, whereas I was blind, now I see." And with that one word, he cut their backs into ridges, flogged them all, and drove them out of his presence. Stand to what you know, however simple the story. You may find in the long run that even a stone picked out of a brook may fell a giant and kill him.

Hanani was nobody: he had a hearer in Nehemiah, who was an army himself. He set fire to the right sort of man, and what that man did will appear as we proceed in this vivid and stimulating story.

"I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped."

How indestructible is love! "I am in favour with great Artaxerxes—I am cup-bearer to the king—the king likes me—the king speaks familiarly to me—my bread is buttered on both sides for life—I will not ask this envoy who has come to Persia anything about the Jews; I will forget the past, I will live in the sunnier present." Was it so that Nehemiah spoke? No, he spoke very softly; his was a wonderful voice,—there was a rare power of penetration in that whisper of his. He hardly speaks above his breath, yet his breath searches Hanani through and through. He says, "How about the Jews, my brethren, and about those that escaped—the poor remnant; and how about the dear old city; and what about Zion, loved of God? Have you heard anything; can you tell me anything?" This is the indestructibleness of love. If you had had a child in that great crisis of history whose life had been in peril, whom you had not seen for dreary months, you could not have asked more tenderly about the child's life than Nehemiah the cup-bearer of the Persian king asked about Zion and the places of the dear old footprints. "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget her cunning."

Unless we have enthusiasm we can have no progress. If you belong to a church, and do not love every inch of the old walls, why,

then there is no pith in you. Let us have enthusiasm and rapturous attachment to persons, places, ideas, programmes. Let every heart have a Zion for which it would die. Nehemiah had passion in his heart, enthusiasm in his blood; a man of fine, high, keen temper, and the old old days were singing in the chambers of his memory. When he saw anybody from the old place, he felt they were sacred because of the air they had last breathed, and he asked from them tidings of the things that were dearest to his heart. Would to God that the Church of Christ would recover its enthusiasm—its deep, pathetic, tender love of sacred things; we should now and then hear its voice above a whimper; now and then the loudest thunder in the air would be issuing from the Church, singing proudly its holy anthem,—rapturously its great majestic pæan.

When Nehemiah heard the story, what happened?

"It came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept" (v. 4).

Exactly what we might have expected from the temperament and the pith of that man. A man is not weak because he sits down to cry now and then. There are some tears that are dreadful—some tears that will harden into bars and bolts and be heard of again in sharp encounters. What are our tears? Nehemiah's words were battles, and his tears may be said to have been the ammunition of war. Are we all words and tears? Is there no stroke behind? no activity, no force? What are we doing? Could we hear of sacred places being burned down without shedding a single tear for them? Could we hear of St. Paul's cathedral being burned down without feeling that we had sustained an irreparable loss? and if anything happened to that grand old Abbey at Westminster we should feel as if we had lost a sacred place—a sanctuary, and as if it were every Englishman's duty to help to put it up again. No, he never could put it up again! There are some men who never could be replaced; some structures never can be substituted. Let us have pathos of nature, enthusiasm, passion, feeling! Let us care for something; that care for something may be our salvation some day. It is out of such smoking flax that God causes the fire of high consecration to burn.

And whilst he wept he prayed. He said:

"I beseech thee, O Lord God of heaven,* the great and terrible God† that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments: let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant" (vv. 5, 6).

Sometimes we are shut up in prayer. When we are, we are inclined to debate the whole subject, as we call it—the whole subject of prayer. But when the Zion of our heart is thrown down, the dearest life of our whole circle is torn out, when we are blind with tears and weak because of bereavement, then we do not debate about prayer—we pray. If you want to prove the hollowness of prayer, do your best to pray sincerely for seven years at a time, and that is the way either to confirm or to upset the whole doctrine of prayer. To have told Nehemiah at this time not to pray would have only exposed the speaker to the charge of insanity. There are times when the heart takes everything into its own care and into its own keeping, and when prayer bursts from the heart irrepressibly. And it is in these agonies, in these tragic hours, in these blood-shedding moments, that we can tell whether prayer is a conception of the fancy or a necessity of the heart. How true and beautiful is that priestly element in a man's nature—for we contend that every man's constitution is touched with tragic circumstances—when conditions in which he is personally most keenly interested are pressed upon his attention.

"Then I stood and prayed,"—the natural priest, not ordained of man. As Macaulay said of the Puritans, so we may say of this praying Nehemiah: "He is a priest, not of man's ordination, but by the imposition of a mightier hand." Have you ever prayed for anybody? Has the priest that is in you, in the best sense of the term, in the sense of intercession, mediation, longing desire to serve somebody, ever risen up to plead one cause

* This title of the Almighty, which is Persian rather than Jewish (see 2 Chron. xxxvi. 23; Ezra i. 2; vi. 10; vii. 12, 21, 28), is a favourite one with Nehemiah, who had been born and brought up in Persia. See i. 5; ii. 4, 20, etc.—*The Speaker's Commentary.*

† So in ch. iv. 14, and ix. 32. The expression is taken from Deut. vii. 21, and the remainder of the verse from Deut. vii. 9. Daniel's address to God in Dan. ix. 4 is curiously similar.—*Ibid.*

with God? If so, in that high attitude you realise, so far as your poor nature can reach him, the true conception of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. "He ever liveth to make intercession for us." "There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."

What does Nehemiah do in relation to this matter? He takes the case to head-quarters at once, and in doing so he openly, minutely, fully, exhaustively, unreservedly, confesses guilt. That is the first thing to be done in any case. Did Nehemiah say, "Lord, we have been badly used: in the course of this controversy with Babylon we have suffered as the weak suffer under the hand of the strong. We have not deserved our punishment; it has been our misfortune rather than our fault to find ourselves in these circumstances; now be good enough to look upon us and help us in this hour of undeserved calamity"? Was that his prayer, was that his intercession, was that his supplication? It would have died before it reached the roof of his own chamber; that is not the prayer that throws back the doors of the kingdom of heaven. The man shed as it were great drops of blood, and his whole heart was in his desire, and he spoke in anguish, with that clear, keen, poignant voice that would find its way through the interstices of the stars, and make God hear. How have you prayed? Artistically, formally, conventionally? You never sent out the heart as a keen cry of unsupportable agony to God for anything that was consistent for him to give and good for you to receive without that cry coming back, dove-like, with a branch from some tree in heaven. Nehemiah's was a model confession. There was no disguise, no reserve. He made a clean breast of it. Do you the same, about your theft, and your lying, and your untruthfulness in every way, and your dishonourableness. Set a window of the most beautiful transparent glass right in the very middle of your breast, that all that is going on there may be seen. Confess it, and confession itself is half restoration. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." Whilst we confess he remits. But there is no peace to the wicked. If you are keeping back any part of the price, he will keep back the whole of the blessing.

Now, he said, I will go and see the king. "Grant me mercy in the sight of this man, O Lord." I will do something. And it came to pass in the month Nisan that he went in—about the same time as our March. He got the news in December, and for three months he kept it like a fire in his bones. Well, it does seem as if in March we could speak about better things. Has the spring any effect upon us? It does seem that about March or April, when the blossoms are just beginning to peep out here and there, as if we too—nobler trees—should be putting forth our vows, and resolutions, and purposes. We do not wonder that men should at such a time be speaking things that they had in their hearts in the cold December, and seeking to realise them in some beautiful and useful way. We cannot always speak the thing that is in us. Some things want three months' musing and meditation and turning over. "I mused in my heart, and the fire burned; then spake I with my tongue," and that which was buried in our hearts in December snow awoke up in the March breezes and longer light of the opening year, and shed itself into those who were about us.

How long has the vow to serve Christ been in your heart? Where is the vow now? We fear lest you should exclaim: "The harvest is past, and the summer is ended, and I am not saved!" No one could reproach you for keeping the vow awhile in your heart; rather let it rest there awhile—work in thee mightily—presently we shall see that vow coming out in open speech, in high declaration for God.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, be thou our strength, and we need no more defence; be thou near us, and the enemy must stand back; let thine eyes watch over our way, and our feet will never stumble. We put ourselves into thy keeping—we would not go out alone: the darkness is too dense, and the road too difficult for our poor wit, and sense, and power, and therefore we give up ourselves wholly to the direction and blessing of God. Enable us to say every morning, God is my refuge and strength, therefore will not I fear the engagements and difficulties of the day: enable us at eventide to say, God is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? And in the hour and article of death, enable us by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us, who was delivered for our offences and rose again for our justification, to say, Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Thy fear drives out all other fear. Perfect love takes full possession of the heart where thou dwellest, and behold, where perfect love is, there can be no fear. Work in us mightily the completeness and beauty of thy love, and thus deliver us from all danger, and save us and comfort us by thine infinite grace. Amen.

Chapter ii.

"And it came to pass in the month Nisan [the name given by the Persian Jews to the month previously called "Abib," the first month of the Jewish year, or that which followed the vernal equinox. It fell four months after Chisleu (see ch. i. 1)], in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes [it is generally agreed that the Artaxerxes intended is Longimanus, who reigned from B.C. 465 to B.C. 425] the king, that wine was before him: and I took up the wine, and gave it unto the king" (v. 1).

THE RESULT OF HANANI'S MESSAGE.

THE urn which held the ashes of Artaxerxes is in the British Museum, so that those who have any curiosity about the urn which held the ashes of the king can easily satisfy that curiosity. In the month of Nisan Nehemiah had his chance. He received the message about the month of December, and for some three months, more or less, he had been turning over this message in his mind, wondering what to do with it, eagerly looking for the gate being set ajar, that he might push it back a

little farther and go through it, and do the work upon which his heart was set. For three months the gate seemed not to be opened at all, but in the month Nisan the opportunity came. Whether Artaxerxes took a little more wine than usual is not stated in the Scripture: we simply know that, whilst Artaxerxes had the wine in his hand and was enjoying his goblet, a certain conversation took place between him and his cup-bearer which ended in very important consequences.

For three months Nehemiah was steady to his vow. How long are you going to keep that best vow you ever made in your life dumb in your heart? How long are you going to allow it to lie unredeemed, unrealised? The king's gate stands ajar: on it is written "Welcome,"—on it is written, "Knock and it shall be opened;" still further, "Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation!" Speak the word, it will be a sound in thine ear for ever: repeat the oath, and say thou wilt fulfil it to the letter; and the very utterance of the oath and the very repetition of the desire to be better will themselves be elements in your education, and will help you onward a step or two heavenward, Godward.

Let us follow the history and see what its modern applications may possibly be.

"Now I had not been beforetime sad in his presence. Wherefore the king said unto me, Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart. Then I was very sore afraid" (vv. 1, 2).

How beautifully, how exquisitely human and true is this! You have been waiting for your chance: the chance suddenly comes, and you who were on tiptoe of expectation for it, seeing it as it were face to face, fall back, and feel the chill of a great fear in your half-misgiving heart. It is so with all great crises in life. Little things may happen, and we may say we expected these—they may come as mere matters of course—we have been looking for them, and now they have come we care next to nothing for them. But the great messages that make the soul new, that inspire the life with a new determination, the great gospels, the infinite evangels that regenerate and sanctify the soul, these, though waited for long, always awaken inexpressible surprise,

and in not a few cases they first create a great fear before bringing in their complete and final joy. For three months Nehemiah said, "O that he would speak to me! I would be so glad." Artaxerxes spoke to him and he was sore afraid. Is that a contradiction? Only to a wooden life and to a dullard, not to a living soul, not to a sympathetic spirit, not to a man who has lived everywhere and through all time, who by the variety of his experience has been the contemporary of all ages. Do you know what is meant by waiting for a great opportunity—having a great opportunity set before you, and then falling back from it out of the fear of a great surprise? Such was Nehemiah's experience on that memorable day when Artaxerxes read the writing of sorrow on the face of his faithful cupbearer.

"And I said unto the king, Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?" (v. 3).

Here is the beautifulness of an unselfish sorrow; here is an individual magnifying himself into a nation; here is one poor heart taking upon itself the sorrows of a kingdom. Do you know what such suffering is? You say your own burden is heavy enough, without taking any additional weight upon you. Then you can never enter into the meaning of the experience of Nehemiah. But you who do know what it is to have every orphan to keep, every poor soul to help, every blind man to lead over a corner in our streets—you who by the vastness and tenderness of your sympathy have every poor creature to take care of, will enter into Nehemiah's feeling when he assumed to represent the condition of the whole Jewish people under the circumstances narrated in the text. How could he be glad when his fathers' sepulchres were torn to pieces and the gates of his fathers' city were consumed? He entered into other people's feelings—he was more than a mere unit in the great aggregate, he was human; he took upon himself the sufferings of others, and when he did so, he was but preparing himself to take also upon his own heart the joys of others. He who can go deepest in sympathy with sorrow can rise highest in sympathy with laughter. If we have never had any keen, deep, devouring woe, we have never had any pure, lofty, inexpressible delight.

We have been told about a man who in the time of the Punic Wars had put a chaplet on his empty head and put his head out of the window to look at the difficulties, the struggles, the hazards of the people, and we know how the Romans treated that man: they took his chaplet off his head, and would have put his head itself in great danger if the head had been worth taking off. Ay, poor fool! could he put on his little green chaplet and say, "I am happy, what do I care for what is occurring in the commonwealth? I have bread enough: why should I think about those who are hungering? my thinking about them cannot help them." There have always been men of that kind, who have lifted their chaplets to their heads and worn individual joys in the midst of great public sorrows—men who could fatten themselves on the sepulchre of the commonwealth, who had no public soul, no sympathy with public distress, who could see an empire—their own empire—rending, aggravated by a thousand sorrows, and tormented by an unconquerable spirit of unrest, and yet take their four meals a day and their airing in the park. Of little use are such people in society, or to the state; they render no service to the body politic. Who would not rather be Nehemiah, sad in the public sorrow, bowed down by the general distress, feeling the agony of the commonwealth at heart, dejected and sad because the city of their fathers' traditions and sepulchres lying waste, and its gates black with fire?

The Jews always remembered this state of Jerusalem. For many a long century at least they never, even in their wealthiest times, built a great house to live in without leaving part of the wall, if it were only one square yard, unplastered, or leaving some out-building unfinished, and writing upon the incomplete parts in large Hebrew letters these words—"If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget her cunning." Do you understand the pathos of that feeling, or are you so wrapped up in your own little concerns, saying, Jerusalem is so far away, and the time of her desolation so remote, that we now plaster every inch of our walls, paper and paint the house throughout, and think of nothing but ourselves? Who could look on that square yard of unplastered wall, and see the expression upon it in memory of the desolation, without at once entering into

complete sympathy with the people who did so? It is better to live thus: it gives us larger life, we take in more: life is more absorbent because more sympathetic, and we get things that help us to see into the deepest parts of human history.

"Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven" [mentally and momentarily before answering the king] (v. 4).

But he had been praying for three months. Yes. Why then did he pray to the God of heaven now? Because you must always have just a little supplementary prayer, if you are a true man. Did you ever finish a prayer? For three months Nehemiah had been opening his window and looking Godward, and pouring out his poor afflicted soul on account of what Hanani had told him, and now, when the king says, "What is thy request?" he stood and prayed to the God of heaven—one word more, gathering up all the three months' prayer in one final cry. Sometimes we have to gather up the prayers of a whole lifetime in one poignant, keenly accentuated petition; sometimes the prayers of a whole lifetime escape us in one deep heartfelt sigh, which the fool standing near, of unsympathetic heart, can never understand. He calls it but a sigh; yet that sigh has blood in it, and life and agony, and that sigh will move the almightiness of God. He knows what it costs. He knows how much heart goes up in that yearning pang to him. "So I stood and prayed to the God of heaven." For three months he had been kneeling, morning, noon, and night, and more frequently still, and now he stands and prays. Is it right to stand and pray? Certainly. Is it right to kneel and pray? Unquestionably. Is it right to pray in a crowd? Yes. Is it right to go into sandy places, and desert paths, and empty, dreary solitudes, and there to pray? Indisputably so. Pray always—pray without ceasing. Nothing depends on the mere form or the mere phrase. Stand and pray—kneel and pray—think and pray—speak and pray. Many a time we have prayed to God without ever saying a word—just the lifting of a speechless heart, and a lifting that is never without peculiar blessing.

This was what is called ejaculatory prayer. We need not change

the word ejaculatory. There is a great deal of Latin in it, no doubt, but still it seems now to belong to the English tongue. It signifies thrown out—darted forth. It implies suddenness, terseness, earnestness. It was not a literary prayer; it was not artistically divided into sections; it was like an arm suddenly thrown out and thrown up. You can pray so, in the warehouse or in the crowded thoroughfare. Do not say that if you only had a little private place of your own to which you could retire, you would enjoy now and then a few moments' communion with God. Make a private place, create silence in the city, in the great seething, tumultuous mob find a sanctuary. A brief prayer, a cry, a sigh, the upward lifting of an eye may bring to thee all-needful angels and chariots of fire and help divine. We must get our ideas of prayer very much simplified. You really do not need a carpet and a hassock, that is unnecessary; you do not need fine words, beautiful phrases, well-turned sentences, bold and resonant literature. You need earnestness, fire, yearning, vehement desire, determination to take the kingdom of heaven by violence. Why, in that way you can always pray. You can say, "God be merciful to me a sinner!"—A brief prayer, all prayers in one, the liturgies of the universe condensed into one sentence. It is an endless prayer, because it involves an endless confession of sin, and weakness, and self-helplessness, and confidence in God.

Nehemiah opened his lips and told the king freely what he wanted. "Moreover I said unto the king ——" When Nehemiah once got his lips opened he spoke with wondrous practical eloquence to Artaxerxes the king. "Moreover"—now what will he say?—"If it please the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over till I come into Judah."

"So I stood and prayed unto the God of heaven—then I asked the king to give me letters." That is the true model of prayer—to pray and then to ask for your letters—to pray to the King of kings and then to accept the ordinary appointments of life—to invoke Omnipotence, and then to use your senses. How have you been praying? Did you sit in the chair and pray that you

might be able at the end of the week to make both ends meet, and then fall asleep until the time came, and wake up to find that both ends did not meet. That was not prayer at all; that was puerility, and sentiment, and nonsense, and profanity. I will pray God to help me to pay every debt I owe, to overcome every difficulty in my way, to beat down every mountain that intercepts my progress. Lord, help me to accomplish a faithful and noble ministry in thinking, in literature, in commerce, in the family—wherever my lot may be cast. Now, having said my prayer, let me go out and do it. There are people who do not believe in prayer, simply because they do not know what prayer is. The prayer they talk about is something defined in the dictionary. Never go to the dictionary for the meaning of a great heart-word. Such meaning you can only get in the agony of your own personal experience. Referring to that as a proof and test of prayer, we may call upon a thousand hearts to say if God be not the hearer and answerer of prayer. Never yet has God denied prayer, when the granting of it would have been a blessing in the true sense of the word, to our own spirit.

"And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me" [comp. Ezra vii. 6, 9, 28; viii. 22] (v. 8).

How very seldom we have the prayer and the answer on the same page! We have now and then just to keep our courage up. For years together we seem to have no literal proof of the existence and nearness of God to our life, and then, just when we can bear it no longer, when the little sand-glass—so little!—o our poor faith is nearly run out, he meets us in burning bush, or in dream wherein the ladder is revealed, or in vision of the night, or in Bethlehem's leading star—somehow—and in that one moment we recover our years' experience, our years' loss, and become young and strong again. But these specialties are granted only now and then. A daily miracle would be a daily commonplace. Let him come as he will—but from the particular argue the universal, from the one instance of prayer answered argue the readiness of the Almighty to answer every prayer that he himself has inspired.

The arrangements were then made. Nehemiah went upon his

journey—came to the governors beyond the river and gave them the king's letters. And now we read—

"When Sanballat * the Horonite, and Tobiah † the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel" (v. 10).

Sanballat and Tobiah are everywhere. There was a great vocalist singing recently—a great master of the divine art. And there was an encore. And a person who was there said, "That

* Sanballat, a native of Horonaim, beyond the Jordan (Neh. ii. 10), and probably also a Moabitish chief, whom (probably from old national hatred) we find united in council with the Samaritans, and active in attempting to deter the returned exiles from fortifying Jerusalem (Neh. iv. 1 *seq.*; vi. 1 *seq.*). Subsequently, during the absence of Nehemiah in Persia, a son of Joiada, the high-priest, was married to his daughter (Neh. xiii. 28). Whether Sanballat held any public office as governor over the Moabites, or over the Samaritans, the record does not state. Such a character is usually ascribed to him on the supposed authority of a passage of Josephus, who speaks of a Sanballat, a Cuthean by birth, who was sent by the last Darius as governor of Samaria (*Ant.* xi. 7, 2). The time assigned to this Sanballat is one hundred and twenty years later than that of the Sanballat of Nehemiah, and we can only identify the one with the other by supposing that Josephus was mistaken both in the age and nation of the individual whom he mentions.

† Tobiah, a base Samaritan, who, having raised himself from a state of slavery to be a trusted favourite of Sanballat, did his utmost to gratify his master by resisting the proceedings of Nehemiah in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. With an affectation of scorn, he, after the manner of Remus in the Roman legend, looked on the constructions of the now hopeful and thriving Jews, and contemptuously said: "Even if a fox go up he will break down their stone wall" (Neh. iv. 3). This insult was the more disgraceful to Tobiah, because his own conduct quickly exposed the insincerity which lay at the bottom of it, for he took a prominent and active part with Sanballat in his unworthy courses against Nehemiah. In these treachery had its share, which Tobiah was enabled to carry on the more easily because he had allied himself with the chief men of Judah, having married the daughter of Shechaniah, the son of Arah, while the son Johanan had taken to wife the daughter of Meshullam, the son of Berechiah (Neh. vi. 17 *seq.*; comp. xiii. 4). These dishonest practices and the use of threats alike proved nugatory. Nehemiah, however, was obliged to leave Jerusalem. By this absence Tobiah profited, in order, with the aid of his relative Eliashib the priest, to get himself comfortably and splendidly established in "a great chamber in the house of God" (ch. xiii. 4). But his glory was short-lived. Nehemiah returned, and caused him and his household-stuff to be ignominiously cast out of the temple. This is the last that we know of this member of that vile class who are ready and unscrupulous tools in the hands of their superiors for any dishonourable undertaking.

is not genuine, you know: that encore is got up by somebody just for the purpose of increasing her reputation or her popularity." It was some man who had come up from some village in some extra-rural district, who sat himself down in the great assembly and knew exactly how the encores were manufactured. Distressing man that—very sad to live with a person so acute—a dreadful martyrdom to have to sit near a person who can chatter such idiocy. But there are always a few people who understand everything—see through it—mark it: saw it just in time to observe how it was and to explain it to the infinite satisfaction of their own folly. Let us not be disagreeable with anybody, but pleasant and sympathetic—even with a preacher.

Nehemiah arrived on the scene of operation, and then he says—"I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well . . . and viewed the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire." Was there ever a picture touched with so delicate a hand? Ruins seen at night-time—think of that solemn picture, think of that scene that might have made the reputation of a Royal Academician—the ruins of the most famous city in the world, seen at night by a lonely man. He took with him some few men; the fewer the better, but probably he left even these at a distance. At a certain point he went out himself: he took his own measure of the situation—ruins—ruins softened by moonlight, ruins aggravated by shadows, ruins seen by a lonely man, ruins looked at by a heart that meant to restore them, and bring back every beam of the ancient glory. If we could paint that picture we might entrance the world!

Take your own measure of the destitution of the world. Every Christian man should go about in the world, so far as he is able to do so, by the aid of reports—to take his own measure of the situation—steal out by night and see what the devil has done with this human nature of ours, and whilst he is walking out under the soft light of the moon and viewing the ruined humanity, he should say, "God helping me, I will do my utmost to undo this mischief and to repair the shattered house of the Lord." Ye are the house of the Lord—ye are God's living temples: the

house and the temple have been defiled and desolated, and every man who has the spirit of Nehemiah in him should take his own estimate—be his own missionary secretary, be his own missionary observer, and be his own missionary so far as it is possible for him to be so, and then he will do some good in his day and generation in the name of the Lord.

Then Nehemiah spoke unto the people, stated the case to them, and called upon them to co-operate with him in his great purpose, and gave them as a sign and token of good a repetition of the king's words that had been spoken unto him. And they said, "Let us arise and build." See what one man can do! One man can set fire to a thousand: Cæsar was more than all Cæsar's legions. When the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled. We cannot all be Goliaths; we cannot all be Cæsars and Hannibals; we cannot all be inspirers; but we can all follow the great inspiration of biblical testimony, and the great lead of the patriotic philanthropic class of noble and godly men. Though we be but a cipher, yet with a unit at our head that unit shall strike individual value into that which of itself is of minor—of almost infinitesimal consequence. Who will arise and build? The people did; Nehemiah did.

"When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn and despised us" (v. 19).

Nehemiah and a handful of men, come to rebuild Jerusalem! and Sanballat nudged Tobiah, and Tobiah nodded to Geshem, and the three drank wine together, and laughed uproariously and with derisive accent, because the instrument was so little adapted to the end that was proposed to be accomplished. "Why do the heathen rage and the people imagine a vain thing?"—"It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. . . The foolishness of God is wiser than men. . . God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty . . . and things that are not, to bring to nought things that are." The instrument which God has chosen is evidently out of all proportion to the end he seeks to accomplish. He will give to his Son the heathen for an inheritance and the uttermost

parts of the earth for a possession; and the men going out in twos and threes, with cheap Bibles under their arms, and with the Cross to talk about—with this instrumentality they are going to convert the world! And to-day Sanballat has had his laugh, and Tobiah his rude merriment, and Geshem has declared that he never heard of anything so unreasonable—and from a human point of view they are quite right. But "if God be for us, who can be against us?"—"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble"—"It is God that justifieth, who is he that condemneth?" It is God who says, "Go ye into all the world and rebuild the waste places, and call the wanderers home, and tell the story of the Cross;" and he who sent us has said, "For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: for it shall not return unto me void." If this be a merely human arrangement, nothing so preposterous was ever conceived in the world, but because of the very preposterousness of the conception from an earthly and temporal point of view, is our faith in the divinity of its inspiration, and in the perfectness of its ultimate success.

What is true of great public movements—building city walls, restoring city gates, converting heathen nations—is also true of the building of character. To men of shattered character we say, Arise and build. To men all broken down, utterly dismantled and distressed, we say, Arise and build. Have you a withered hand? Put it out. But you cannot, except at God's bidding: if he had not bid thee put it out, thou couldst not, but his bidding, his telling thee to put it out is the first pledge that he means to make thee a whole man. God's promises are God's fulfilment.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, teach us that all men are builders, that there is one foundation laid, a stone that is elect, precious, tried, infinite in value, and let every man take heed how he buildeth thereon. Some are building gold and silver and precious stones, upon which the fire shall have no mischievous effect, and some are building wood, and hay, and stubble—which the fire will utterly burn up; nevertheless, the builders themselves may be saved, the foundation upon which they are building is God. Teach us that thou wilt try every man's work of what sort it is, and that thou wilt give to every man according to his work; may we, therefore, labour by day and by night with both hands earnestly—never thinking of ourselves, always thinking of the good work that is to be done, and labouring at it with toil that is itself its own reward. If we have built anything that is strong and beautiful in life, behold thou didst show us where to build—thou didst teach our hands how to put things together: not unto us, therefore, not unto us, but unto thy name be the whole praise. Thou dost teach men how to get wealth—thou dost show them the way out of difficult places, and when they do bring themselves into entanglements and thickets, out of which there is no human deliverance, it is the divine hand that brings them forth into straight lines again, and into wide open spaces of liberty. We thank thee for a thousand deliverances. Behold our feet had slipped and our steps had gone, but thou didst find us in our ruin, and rebuild us, and because the good hand of our God has been upon us we are spared until this hour. Thou knowest what histories we represent, what broken hearts, what shattered fortunes, what unfulfilled vows, what secret cares, what fretful, vexatious anxieties, what prosperity, joy, honour, delight—what presumption, self-boasting, self-enclosure, defiance, challenge, and what modesty, humility, timidity resting upon the Eternal and yearning after the Infinite. According to our diversified experience do thou command thy blessing to rest upon us. Bring us all to Christ, Son of man, Son of God, God the Son. He loved us and gave himself for us, and he is in heaven now on our behalf—his the Mediator's seat—his the Intercessor's cry: O hear that blessed Saviour as he takes up our poor words and repronounces them with the emphasis of his own love. Amen.

Chapter iv.

"But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews" (v. 1).

HOW NEHEMIAH BUILT THE WALL.

WE have heard of Sanballat before. We heard of him in the second chapter, where we read the following words: "When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel." The word in that verse is "grieved"; the men were sore of heart, they were annoyed. There is nothing particular in the way of activity in the feeling—it is rather a passive emotion; but in the verse under consideration we find that the same Sanballat was not grieved in the passive sense of the term, but he was wroth and took great indignation. Was Nehemiah turned aside by his grief? No. But Nehemiah cowered and trembled before the wrath and great indignation of the Horonite, did he not? Never. What was it that sustained him in the midst of this passive opposition, and this active hostility? Why, it was keeping his eye upon the Eternal—there was a great purpose, a supreme and dominating conviction in the man's soul, and it was that which gave him steadiness and constancy and determination, so that he could run through a troop and leap over a wall. If you are taking your line of life from some low centre, then you will be disturbed and fretted by every little accident that may occur on the road; you will have to apologise for your existence and consult everybody as to whether you are to live to-morrow. But if you live in God, if you drink water from the rock-spring—if you feed upon the bread of heaven, then you will turn neither to the right hand nor to the left—you will write the old Latin motto on your right hand and on your left—"Per diem, per noctem"—"Night and day—on!" Who wrote the programme of your life? In what ink is it written? From what source do you derive your inspiration? Here is a man who was not turned aside by the grief, the wrath, the indignation of his enemies; he went straight on as if the whole universe were applauding his march. Let us endeavour to find out the secret of his inspiration: to draw the inspiration of our life from the same source, and to live as far above all incidental disturbance and superficial frets as Nehemiah did—right away up yonder, near the sun, where God is—where his blessing rests perpetually upon those who serve him.

Let us see how the Horonite expresses his wrath and indignation. Will he have anything original in his speech? Did the devil ever teach his scholars a single new speech? He has only one speech, only one great black lie—it may be pronounced in this key or in that, but it is the same old villainous story, false from end to end, every syllable of it saturated with falsehood! still it will be instructive to hear what a mocking man has to say. When a man is in mocking mood he usually speaks with some pungency of accent.

"And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day? will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned?" (v. 2.)

That was an irreligious view of a religious work—it is very well put indeed from his own point of view. First of all the Jews are feeble. As a matter of fact they certainly are without any peculiar strength. Will they fortify themselves? What will they do? Will they pluck dock-leaves and use them as breast-plates? Will they search the fields round about Jerusalem for nettles, and use those stinging herbs as implements and instruments of war? What will they do? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned? There is no stone to be had—no open quarries—no rocks inviting them; how will they get the stones? Why, they will revive the rubbish—put the mud together with their wet hands, and thus they will make stones. Ha, ha! That was his speech to the army. Is that a speech sufficient to stir the blood of an army? The army heard it and turned over on the other side, to have a little more sleep and a little more slumber, and a little folding of the hands together.

We do not wonder at men looking at Christian agencies and laughing at them. You have laughed when you saw a young man walking along with his Bible under his arm. Well, it did look exceedingly humble, very modest, and wholly unlikely that a man with a gilt-edged book under his arm was going to do anything at all in the world. But in that book he had the whole panoply of God—he had the book that moves the world, say what men will. They burn it: they come to rake over the hot

ashes; there it is, the smell of fire has not passed upon it. It is God's delight to choose foolish things in order to pull down things that are strong. Search the divine history through and through, and you will find that this is God's principle—base things of the world hath he chosen and foolish things and things that are not, to bring to nought things that are. There is a giant to be struck down—a pebble will do it: there is an army to be surprised—a lamp and pitcher will be enough. God's law is the law of simplicity; man's law is the law of round-aboutness. Man does not like the straight and simple course—he likes a very great deal of elaboration and intricacy and puzzle, so that no other man shall be able to find out the secret and the key of his patent. He likes to keep a small key in his pocket, and to take it out now and then to pay adoration to it as to an idol. God says the simplest plan is the best—go straight at it—a pebble for armour, a pitcher and lamp for use in war, yea, and things that are not—an army of nothing—to bring to nought things that are.

Are you building character? You will be laughed at. Are you attempting to start on a new course of life? Sanballat will make a mocking speech about you. You once said, "Now, God helping me, I am going to begin: give me a pen and ink," and you took it and wrote your name to a vow. And the next day Sanballat began to say to you, "Why, you don't mean to say you are going through that sort of thing? I wouldn't if I were you—it will never do for you. Come along and go with your old folks, stand by your old comrades, and we will see you through." It was a crisis in your history. If you said, "No, God helping me, I stand by the book and by the name, and I will look at those poor, crooked, rude letters, and out of their ink shall come inspiration to my poor heart again and again," then you did well. Hold on: do not be mocked out of your godliness—do not be laughed into hell. What will these mocking people do for you in the swellings of Jordan?

There was another man with Sanballat—we have heard of him—it was Tobiah. And Tobiah has a little speech to make about the wall that is being built. Tobiah put his case figuratively—he looked round at those who sat by him and he said,

"Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall." Tobiah therefore said, "Gentlemen, sit down, there is no occasion for you to distress yourselves: the very first cat that goes out in stepping on the stone wall will throw it down."

These are not the men who will make any great impression in the world. There is not the right tone there—there is not the right sound. We can tell an earnest man by the mere tone of his voice. The whimperer does nothing, the mocker does nothing, the man of mere irony and jeering power does nothing. If any great positive lasting work is to be done in the world, it must be done by men of conviction, solidity of judgment, reality of character, divinity of spirit. And one such man is an army in himself—a multitude, a conqueror. That is what we want now—we want amongst us earnest men, men who believe something, men who will sacrifice something for their convictions, men who know right from wrong, the right hand from the left, and who will go straight on, whoever may jeer, satirise, mock, condemn, despise. God send us such men!

It will be interesting to know how Nehemiah deports himself under these mocking speeches. Are we going too far in saying that such speeches would have blown a great deal of the bloom off our piety? Are we going too far in saying that mocking speeches like these would have frightened you off your knees, frightened you into cowardice, saying, "I don't make much profession of religion; I like to go to church now and then, just as a way of putting off the time"? Are we going too far in saying that you could not have stood the assault made by such men as Sanballat and Tobiah? Let us see how Nehemiah bore it. These speeches were reported to him, and what did he say? "We can jeer as well as they—we can return sharp messages to their foolish speeches—we can argue with them, and control as well as they by sheer force of argumentative power?" No. When he heard their mockery and their reviling, he lifted up that grand face,—lined, ridged, wrinkled face, with age in it, and yet with immortal youth in it, too, and said, "Hear, O our God!" He made his appeal to heaven—he handed the

speech upward—he put it into the hands of God to answer—he said in effect, "O thou God of Israel, answer these mocking men thyself." Yes, it is better that God should answer our enemies than that we should answer them. We have something better to do, and though we might outshine them in wit, outvie them in mockery, slay them with their own weapons, it is better not to do so; let us leave our enemies in the hands of God.

What did Nehemiah then proceed to do? He says with great simplicity, "So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof." Why? "For the people had a mind to work." That is the secret of success. It will be a secret worth your learning, young man, just having begun business—have a mind to work.

How is it in the building of the great Christian wall? There is the Independent, or Congregationalist, building his little bit, and yonder is the Episcopalian, and yonder is the Baptist, and yonder is somebody else, and they will not lend one another a spoonful of lime. Do let us remember that it is one wall, it is one Zion, it is one Jerusalem—why not work together magnanimously in the spirit of brothers, realising the true ideal of patriotic and Christian fellowship and brotherhood, and let the wall rise from all points simultaneously, all compact, solid, indestructible masonry. Wherever there is a good man, whatever his particular denomination or badge may be, we should work heart and soul with him; or otherwise, God forgive us! for we sin against the spirit of the cross of his Son.

"But it came to pass, that when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up, and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth, and conspired all of them together to come and to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it" [*rather*, to do it hurt] (vv. 7, 8).

If the enemy thinks it worth while to be in earnest, let us take a hint from his policy. The enemy is up earlier in the morning than we are. The dram shop is open before the drapery house. Does the house of ill-fame ever put its candle out? Is the bad place ever locked up so that we cannot get into it? Our churches are fastened up, instead of being open early in

the morning so that some men passing might call in for a few minutes. Is that earnestness—is that meaning it? Let any man, who ever was able in business to put one penny on the top of another by sheer industry, answer the flippant question. The enemies conspired. To conspire is to blow, to breathe together. But there is a better word than conspiracy, and that is union. Union is conspiracy, and something more: it is conspiracy sanctified—conspiracy assured—conspiracy made permanent. The conspiracy of bad men is but a momentary arrangement—the conspiracy or union of good men ought to be a perpetual glory and satisfaction.

If there was conspiracy on one side there was union on the other. What does Nehemiah say, now that Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arabian, have all been joined by the Arabians and Ammonites and Ashdodites—what does he say now? With marvellous constancy of purpose he turns up his face heavenward, and says, "Nevertheless, we made our prayer unto our God." These were times in which a man could pray. It is difficult to pray now—we are not in any crisis that tears the soul, we are not in any peril amounting to personal agony, things are going pretty smoothly and comfortably, and it is difficult to pray in stagnant water. Great litanies, mighty shouts have gone up through the howling wind and screaming tempest, through the billows of the troubled sea, through the thunders of the agitated air. In great sorrows men pray; in great trials men intercede; when the enemy draws a cordon round and round—then they pray. Under other circumstances they hold small controversies about prayer, and put perplexing riddles to one another on the theological conception of the divine relation to law; but when they are pursued by wolves, and their hearts turn into great flaming agonies, then the long metaphysical words go right out of them, and they come to simple language—to direct, face to face, hand to hand contact with God. Have we ever prayed so? Then there is no possibility of shaking our faith by any wordy controversy or syllable-mongering and hammering of insane metaphysicians.

Nehemiah set the people to watch. Having prayed he

appointed them their places—set the people with their families, with their swords, their spears, their bows. "I looked and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people ——" We have heard Sanballat's mocking speech, Tobiah's jeering remarks about the fox's putting his fore-paw upon the wall and pulling it down; let us hear Nehemiah. Up to this time he had been talking upward—praying to God; now he is going to make a speech to the people, and to the nobles, and the rulers, and it runs thus: "Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible; and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses." What will they do? They will fight. This speech is one that must touch them; read it again. "Remember the Lord, which is great and terrible;"—that is the religious aspect —"and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses,"—your hearthstones; fight for all that is near and dear to you. A speech like that is as a word of the Lord. It cannot return to the speaker void. Earnestness always accomplishes great results. After this, "the half of my servants wrought in the work, and the other half of them held both the spears, the shields, and the bows, and the habergeons."* Understand the picture—half building, half watching. Affirmative work, and service lying in wait, kept in reserve. Builders —soldiers—sword, spear, trowel, hammer—a beautiful and useful division.

We are mistaken in our view of life if we suppose that there is nothing of that kind going on to-day, even in civilised countries. This is an exact, even literal, picture of the things that are round about us. Do you say, Nehemiah's men had a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other—I have only a trowel and not a sword, so how can it be a literal picture of what is taking place in my own time and in my own land? In this way. Other people are holding the sword for us whilst we are building. An enemy always occasions tremendous loss of power, waste of talent. The

* Or, "coats of mail." Coats of mail were common in Assyria from the ninth century B.C., and in Egypt even earlier. They were made of thin laminæ of bronze or iron, sewn upon leather or linen, and overlapping one another.—*The Speaker's Commentary.*

policemen are watching, the soldiers are fighting; that is the picture of civilisation as known to ourselves. Men can only return to their business every morning because the policemen parade the streets all night. That is the picture of civilisation. We are at peace with all the world; but we dare not disband the army, dissolve the navy, and send the volunteers and reserve forces home, to merchandise, to mechanism, to art and science.

We think that all is going on well because we are at church twice a day; we say, "Well, thank God, everything is very nice in England, sitting under our own vine and fig-tree, none daring to make us afraid." It is because we have in London alone some thousands of men with helmets, with batons, with defences about their persons—we have set them to watch the elements that would set fire to our social fabric in a moment: that would overpass the lines of social division and family defence and household security, and make a havoc amidst the social beauty of our privileged land. We have only edged these people out of sight—they are all there; we have crowded them into the back slums—but they are all there. And we walk down the thoroughfare and say —"Peaceful evening—very calm—very comfortable; our own vine, our own fig-tree, and great improvements in social life, great progress in the arts and sciences, great advancement in civilisation since I was a boy." In one point of view that is right enough—within its own proper limits it is a true picture, and one to be admired and to occasion mutual felicitation amongst Englishmen; but there are forces in London that want to rob, and ravish, and destroy London, and they are only kept back by men who represent the spirit of social order and law. Break down that boundary, and where is our English civilisation? So we repeat —the picture we have of Nehemiah's building the wall, with the sword and trowel, is a picture of English life at the present day.

Nehemiah had a man beside him—who was it? "He that sounded the trumpet was by me." What was the use of a trumpeter now? What was the use of having a man to take up a brass instrument, and make a noise in the air? A decorative piece of humanity—nothing more. You are wrong. "We are far apart one from another: we must have a signal: when you

hear a blast from the trumpet, come together—mass yourselves, the enemy is there." And so we must in society have men in high political places, in high military places, in high ecclesiastical places—trumpeting men, men who can sound a blast, make a cry, set up a signal, float a banner, give the watchword, congregate and mass the people into one patriotic solidity. And these are men that are truly of the working classes. Some say, "What does a preacher do for his living—what does a newspaper writer do for his living—what does a bootmaker do for his living—what do we want of songs, lyrics, ballads, odes? We are the working men, hammering iron, building stones and bricks up." That is a narrow and mistaken view. We are all necessary—builder, architect, painter, writer, preacher, schoolmaster, and doctor—we are all necessary to one another, and we ought to recognise the men who are ahead of us all, who can see farther than we can, and who sound the blast when there is any occasion for our coming together to a common rendezvous, to make a common front to face the common foe.

"So we laboured in the work: . . . so neither I, nor my brethren, nor my servants, nor the men of the guard which followed me, none of us put off our clothes, saving that every one put them off for washing" [*or*, every one went with his weapon for water. Bishop BARRY (of Sydney) says: This rendering is very improbable, as the words are simply: "Every man his weapon water." Some interpret that "each man's weapon was his water": evidently too subtle a turn of thought. It is best, on the whole, to supply the ellipsis: "every man went with his weapon to the water"] (vv. 21, 23).

That was work. How do we work? "So we laboured at the wall"—at the wall, at one thing, at a definite object, at a prescribed and well-understood work—at it, all at it, always at it, loving it and wanting to urge it forward. "So we laboured—laboured—laboured." What is the Church doing—what is the Church in the city doing—empty, desolate, sitting in its own loneliness, moaning over its own solitariness—what is the Church doing? If a man in the Church were to get up and speak above what somebody else considers to be a proper tone, he would be condemned and despised and avoided. If a man were to organise extraordinary work, there are not wanting narrow-minded Pharisees, small-spirited zealots, little—almost immeasurable—self-idolising popes, who would say that such kind of work was

not the kind of service on which they could put the seal of their endorsement. And so the Church is always washing itself and putting on some new garment, and going to law to know whether it ought to have that garment on or not. Whilst we are doing that, the foxes are saying to one another—"This is the wall, is it? You pull that stone down, and I will pull this: they are all at law, they want to know whether they shall eat wafers or loaves —whether they shall stand to the east or look to the west—pull down the wall!"

We want to build—to build; to get a positive, distinct, affirmative work done. When we hear an earnest man, we need not care whether his face is to the east or west or the north or the south. Let us ask, "What is his word; is there music in his voice; is there redemption in his gospel; is there earnestness in his appeal; are there tears in the sound issuing from his throat; does he mean it?" And then, whether he be labouring at our corner of the wall or not, let us say, "God bless him—help him to build much—help him to build solidly, and God reward him for his work." Men, brethren, and fathers—Independents, Presbyterians, Baptists, Episcopalians, whatever we be, let us forget all that is little and unworthy and trifling and superficial, and non-essential—and then, coats off, every one, all day at the work, and God bless every servant that toils in his name and strives to promote his glory.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, we are lost—therefore do we hail the blessed gospel that the Son of man is come to seek and to save us. Thou mightest have come to seek and to destroy us, for we have broken thy law, we have grieved thy Spirit, we have done the things we ought not to have done, and we have left undone the things that we ought to have done: but thou didst in thy great mercy send thy Son Jesus Christ to be the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but for the sins of the whole world. We bless thee for a salvation impartial as the sunlight—shining upon the king's palace and upon the mean man's hut: we bless thee for a gospel adapted to every state and condition of life, a great and wonderful work of love, that touches our sin, that throws the light of hope upon our despair, that comforts us when no other consolation can touch our woe, and that throws upon the grave itself a glorious and a heavenly immortality. We bless thee for the glorious gospel: we have found it to be glorious: it found us in our low and lost estate, it spoke to us of thy heart, of thy love, of thy righteousness, of our own guilt and helplessness, and it shone upon us like a light in a dark place, and it brought to our hearts the comfort and assurance of an infinite redemption. Enable us to feel that Christ has done for us all that is needful to be done, and that we have alone to accept his work by a loving, simple, childlike, unquestioning trust, and inasmuch as this trust is essential to our salvation, hear us when we say "Lord, increase our faith." Do thou destroy the power of the enemy, and let the wiles of the tempter be broken. Throw the enemy himself into confusion when he pursues our life, and enable us to hide ourselves in the infinite sanctuary of the defence of God, that, covered by the omnipotence of thy hand no malign power may be able to touch us. Guide us all our days —help us up the steep hill: when the wind is bleak and the road is drear come nearer to us, and give us to feel the tenderness and the omnipotence of thy presence. Then shall there be no tears in our eyes, no aching shall disturb our hearts, no throb of mortal disease shall be baffling our rest, and the whole head shall be strong, and the whole heart shall be sound, and we shall walk on, forward, higher, upward, in that strength and peace and in the solace of thine infinite consolation, till we become perfected according to thy purpose, sanctified in every thought, cleansed and ennobled in every motive, and made beautiful with the loveliness of the glory of Christ. Lord, hear this prayer offered at the cross; whilst we yet feel the sacrificial blood from the holy Victim let thine answer be a reply of peace. Amen.

Chapter v.

"And there was a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brethren the Jews" (v. 1).

NEHEMIAH'S HINDRANCES.

UP to this time Nehemiah and such as were willing to work with him had been engaged almost night and day in building the wall which he determined to reconstruct. Things have been going on with some excitement, because there were enemies among the heathen who were determined to do their very utmost to make the work of Nehemiah almost impossible. They tempted him, they threatened him, they scorned him: they left undone nothing that they could do to trouble his course, to foil his purposes, to cover his wishes and his plans with disappointment and mortification. Nehemiah, however, steadily pursued his way, with a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other—the people kept on building—but in this chapter there is a new tone in the history. So long as the opposition came from Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arabian and the people who sympathised with them, all belonging to the camp of heathenism, Nehemiah went steadily forward, encouraging his people to pursue their toil hopefully and resolutely. But now the opposition is not from the enemy—there is sedition within the ranks of Nehemiah's own friends, or in the ranks of those who ought to have been his patriotic co-operators.

"There was a great cry of the people and of their wives," not against the heathen, not against Sanballat and Tobiah, "but against their brethren the Jews"—the wealthier Jews, the stronger men amongst them who wanted to make profit out of the difficulty of the case, who bought up the corn at one price and sold it at another—who lent out money at usurious rates and oppressed the people in demanding a heavy percentage on the loans which they had granted; so that there was not only the heathen opposition, there was internal difficulty. Outward assault Nehemiah could manage, but this internecine strife, this domestic oppression, this tyranny within the household line troubled him with a new difficulty, oppressed him with a new discouragement. When a man's foes are those of his own household, his heart simply gives way. "For it was not an enemy," he might have said, "then I could have borne it"—and it is the complaint of one that his familiar friend had lifted up the

heel against him. And of Christ it is said, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not."

How difficult it is to permeate a whole nation with the spirit of high patriotism. Nehemiah will be faithful—a man here and a man there may be equal to the occasion, but how difficult to inspire a nation with the common sentiment of distrust of the enemy, with the common sentiment of mutual confidence. If an enemy were assaulting England, there are men who would sacrifice all they had to defend their paternal shores, and there are also Englishmen who would be within the lines turning the occasion to selfish profit, building up their personal fortunes out of the catastrophes of the empire. This is exactly what the wealthier and better-to-do Jews did in the days of Nehemiah: they oppressed the hireling, they added toil to the labour of the weary man; their one purpose was to increase themselves, to aggrandise their possessions, no matter what became of the name of the Jews or the fortunes of Israel. How is it with us? How difficult it is to be public-spirited, to care anything for the line that is beyond our own threshold. There are men in whom it is impossible to awaken a public spirit. They are not necessarily bad men—they may have many excellent virtues; they may be hospitable and kind: but rather than step forward and utter their voices in an exclamation that could be heard, they would be willing that the whole country should go down. Let us encourage them to take some interest in questions that lie beyond the little nut-shell of their own houses. Let us hear the younger people discussing great subjects, and we shall have hope of the country; but if they can talk upon nothing but the most gossipy and trivial themes, in that very fact we have a guarantee that the spirit of lofty self-sacrificing patriotism must go down.

Nehemiah was therefore discouraged by the brawling on one side and the oppression on the other, and there is a tone in brave, good Nehemiah's voice that we have not heard before. Up to this time it has been a good round voice—a mighty bell with a mighty clapper—but now there is a wail in it, a threnody, a mournfulness that is very pathetic. A man that can stand against a whole army of heathen opponents may succumb when

his own little child lifts its tiny fist against him. Said the grand old Scipio, he would rather that Hannibal, his enemy, should tear out his heart and eat it with salt, than that Lelias, his friend, should speak one cross word to him. So we feel that to encounter all the argument, so-called, and all the opposition and flippant chatter and miserable objections of infidelity, is nothing: but when those who wear the king's badge lift up the hand of high treason or utter a word of sedition, then it is that the soldier's heart reels, trembles, dies: for if his friends turn against him, what will not his enemies do? Get strength at home, constancy in the Church, unity in the redeemed fellowship, public spiritedness in the commonwealth; then

> "As some tall cliff, that lifts its awful form,
> Swells from the vale, and midway leaves the storm,
> Though round its breast the rolling clouds are spread,
> Eternal sunshine settles on its head."

So shall it be with the Church of God, if every member, from the oldest veteran to her youngest child, shall be one and indissoluble and loving. Have we been faithless, inconstant, sympathising with the enemy? Then let us repent of the high treason, crawling as the traitor that ought not to be forgiven, and for the sake of the great drops of blood that fell from us in our agony we shall have one more chance in the Church.

What was this new tone in the voice of good, brave Nehemiah? He tells us—

> "And I was very angry when I heard their cry and these words" (v. 6).

There is a righteous anger—there is a godly indignation, and the people who can take great national disasters or ecclesiastical misfortunes without disturbing themselves are not amiable,—they are callous, selfish, mean. There are men who would dine as lavishly and sleep as soundly as ever were they to hear that the throne was tottering and that the nation was giving way at the core. So long as they have their accustomed loaf, and can go to their accustomed sources of personal enjoyment, what are the wrecks of empires and the misfortunes of commonwealths to their mean, narrow, ignoble spirits? It was not so with Nehemiah. He was very angry, his face flamed with fire, and his eyes burned

in their sockets, and his voice choked in his swelling throat, and he declared unto the people the law of probity, the law of honour, the law of patriotism, and appealed to them on the highest possible ground,—common interest, common sentiment, common tradition,—and brought to bear all that was pathetic and suggestive in the history of Israel upon the minds of those who had erred in that crisis of the national disgrace. But did Nehemiah lose the power of self-deliberation? He would then not have been very angry, he would have lost himself altogether and would have dispossessed himself of every qualification to be the leader of a forlorn hope. Now he shows us exactly what we ought to do under similar circumstances. He was angry—he was very angry—he did not conceal or mitigate his indignation, he did not soften nor subdue his emphasis that he might address himself to ears polite, but with the keenest poignancy of accent and without sparing any token of vengeance, he declared his indignation and laid down the law; but he adds—"then I consulted with myself." That is the limit of a true anger. The danger lies in this, that we become so angry that we lose the power of self-consultation—we are no longer able to discuss a great question within the quiet sanctuary of a clear conscience and a cool judgment. To be angry and sin not, is permitted by the Christian law. Let us not attempt the anger, lest we be caught in the sin. We must not be angry over little things—small, trivial, fretful things, or our spirit will be coarsened and will have all its finest fibre taken out of it. Let us reserve our high anger for great occasions, and the dignity of the opportunity will give sanctity and nobleness to the anger which the outrage has excited.

To see a noble people inflamed with a common sentiment, rising to demand the redress of an all but infinite wrong, is a picture on which no man can look, who has any spirit of patriotism or nobleness in him, without emotion and without religious thanksgiving. Take care that the rising does not become a mere retfulness: let it be a holy and not a baleful fire, a lofty and sacred indignation, and not a miserable, petty self-protrusion and self-excuse. Nehemiah was very angry, but he still had himself to consult. A great man falls back upon himself—"a good man shall be satisfied from himself." Never give yourself away—

always carry about with you, however hot the indignation that may inflame, an inner sanctuary into which you can retire to study that which is right and to do justly, although there be a great provocation to vindictiveness and even to finality of punishment.

What a speech the grand man made! "I rebuked the nobles and the rulers." Was he a noble? was he a ruler? Even though he was neither one nor the other, yet he was a noble and a ruler by the right of being right, and when a child is right he can make a giant quail. You that can crush a child by mere strength of muscle may be made to tremble before his pure glance, before his calm and searching look. He who is wrong is weak—a giant in stature, an infant in power: gigantic outside, but within is the desolation of moral weakness. He, therefore, who has a right cause to plead, and pleads it in the right spirit, can rebuke kings, can chase mighty men. The elevation comes from the nobleness of the cause, not necessarily from the pre-eminence of the individual gifts. A weak man with a great cause will be mighty because of the greatness of the object which has challenged his attention and fascinated his energies. Therefore it is that God chooses oftentimes the weak and foolish things of this world to confound the strong things and the mighty. You will do good if you want to do good. The meanest soul can speak the right word, and the success of his ministry shall be not in the splendour of his individual genius, but in the earnestness of the soul, in the rightness of the spoken word, in the fitness of the opportunity. How good is a word spoken in season! Do not therefore let us say, "We are not nobles, we are not rulers—we have no right to speak," for every man has a right to speak in a good cause. Let those who have been dumb for a life-time speak soon, that it may be known which side they are upon.

What did the good man demand of the Jews? He set a great assembly against them, and said:

"We after our ability have redeemed [Lev. xxv. 48] our brethren [Nehemiah contrasts his own example with that of the rich Jews. He has spent money in redeeming some of his countrymen, who were in servitude among the heathen; they are causing others to be sold into slavery among

the Jews] the Jews, which were sold unto the heathen; and will ye even sell [*i.e.* cause to be sold] your brethren? or shall they be sold unto us?" (v. 8).

That was the old method of rhetoric—that was the Demosthenic plan—appeal, interrogation, questioning, inquiry after inquiry like a shower of darts. How a question like this searches the conscience and makes the judgment sober, and causes the innermost heart to deliver up the key of its secret. "Then held they their peace, and found nothing to answer." They were eloquent men when they had a good cause to plead, dumb men before the seat of judgment. So at the great day of assize, the eloquent orator, who could make the worse appear the better cause, shall be dumb before the charge that shall be laid upon him. Then the man of many words will be unable to frame one sentence in answer to the impeachment in which God shall involve him in the great day of the final audit. "Also I said, it is not good that ye do." Now he puts it gently: having brought them to silence he wants to bring them over from a negative surrender to a positive submission, so he adds—"it is not good that ye do." Before, the charge was sharp, the accent was keen; the result was silence, want of answer on the part of those who were indicted. And Nehemiah construed their silence into a partial acknowledgment at least, and now he lures them with the skill of a mighty leader. He says, lowering the scalding water full ten degrees at once, and making it more tolerable on the scorching skin of those who had been scorched by the heat—he says, "It is not good that ye do." There is a way of uttering such words that suggests a platform of return, that opens a door of re-entry to those who had abandoned their high crime—"Ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies?" That is the eternal appeal, as if he had said, "Nobles and rulers of Israel, is there not enough to do in contending with the assaults that come from the outside—has not Israel a common foe—are there not men round about us, yea even within earshot of this brawling and controversy, and possibly overlooking all these nefarious dealings of yours, who rejoice in the ashes of the old Jerusalem, and sneer at the overthrow of the sacred Zion? Ought we not, therefore, to remember their eyes are upon us, their ear is open to our

discussions; ought we not to unite to show a common front to the common enemy, and cause terror to enter into their hearts, because of the constancy of our faith and the perfection and incorruptibleness of our patriotism?"

It was a heroic appeal; it is the same appeal that stirs nations to-day, that causes the fainting to pluck the banner from the conqueror, and to cause the forlorn hope to bloom into a new and happy expectation. Now Nehemiah was not content with the appeal; he said:

"Restore, I pray you, to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their oliveyards, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money,* and of the corn, the wine, and the oil, that ye exact of them" (v. 11).

A practical man was Nehemiah, and the people heard that grand sermon, and they said instantly, "We will restore them." But Nehemiah was not content even with that promise; he instantly called in the priests, and the priests came forward, and that which the people had declared should be, was sealed by an oath that they should do according to their promise. The Lord send a Nehemiah into every land; a Nehemiah to lead every good cause; a Nehemiah to every section of the Church! An incorruptible patriot was Nehemiah; a man who sank his own individuality, his own ease, honour, fame, and everything that could possibly minister to his personal indulgence in the supreme desire to do good to the commonwealth of Israel.

Nehemiah was not content with the vow and with the oath—he did something himself: he says:

"I shook my lap [compare Acts xviii. 6. By 'lap' is meant what the Latins called the *sinus*, a fold in the bosom of the dress, capable of serving as a pocket], and said, So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labour, that performeth not this promise, even thus be he shaken out, [*rather*, And thus let him be shaken out] and emptied" (v. 13).

And then the people were made one, the true patriotic spirit seized them all: "The congregation said Amen, and praised

* *I.e.* the interest. It is conjectured (says *The Speaker's Commentary*) that the hundredth part was payable *monthly*, or, in other words, that interest was taken at the rate of twelve per cent. The Law altogether disallowed the taking of interest from Israelites. (See Exod. xxii. 25; Lev. xxv. 36, etc.).

the Lord," and Israel, broken, shattered, divided, was made one that day, and by its very unity became a new terror to Sanballat and his malignant companions. And what more did Nehemiah? He not only made the eloquent appeal and brought the controversy to a very satisfactory and healthful conclusion, but he set a magnificent example. He would not eat the bread of the governor.

14. Moreover,* from the time that I was appointed to be their governor n the land of Judah, from the twentieth year even unto the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that is, twelve years, I and my brethren have not eaten the bread of the governor [*i.e.* "have not, like other Persian governors, lived at the expense of the people under my government"].

15. But the former governors that had been before me were chargeable unto the people, and had taken of them bread and wine, beside forty shekels of silver [not forty shekels a year from each person, as some suppose, but rather forty shekels a day from the entire province. For such a table as that kept up by Nehemiah (v. 18) this would be a very moderate payment]; yea, even their servants bare rule over the people: but so did not I, because of the fear of God.

16. Yea, also I continued [*rather*, I repaired; that is, as superintendent] in the work of this wall, neither bought we any land [I did not take advantage of the general poverty to buy poor men's plots]: and all my servants were gathered thither unto the work.

17. Moreover [*The Speaker's Commentary* says: Translate, "Moreover there were at my table, of the Jews, one hundred and fifty rulers, beside those, etc." The governor entertained daily one hundred and fifty of the chief resident Jews, besides keeping open house for such as came on a visit to Jerusalem from foreign countries], there were at my table an hundred and fifty of the Jews and rulers, beside those that came unto us from among the heathen that are about us.

18. Now that which was prepared for me daily was one ox [comp. the provision for Solomon's table (1 Kings iv. 23)] and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and once in ten days store of all sorts of wine [wine was, no doubt, drunk every day; but the stock was renewed only once in ten days]: yet for all this required not I the bread of the governor, because the bondage was heavy [the demands of the Persian crown upon the Jews, as its subjects, were heavy. Compare v. 4 of this chapter, and chap. ix. 36, 37)] upon this people.

A glorious man—the kind of man that has redeemed humanity, the unit that turns us poor cyphers into value. Is there no

* Besides the relief which he afforded to the poorer sort of people by these measures (*Speaker's Commentary*), Nehemiah goes on to show that he spared them also in other ways:—(1) In requiring no taxation for the support of himself and court; (2) In declining to buy the lands of the necessitous (ver. 16); and (3) In taking his full share of the burthen of building the wall (*ibid.*). Thus a single idea pervades the whole chapter.

sacrifice for us to make, no leadership for us to take hold of? If we cannot be Nehemiahs in the splendour of our personal qualifications,* in the invincibleness of our persevering energy, we can at all events cheer the men and bless the leaders who do their best to make the country good and strong. We appeal to Christian men to be unselfish, to be noble, patriotic, public-spirited: to abhor all littleness, meanness, all sharp practice, all detestable conduct. We ask the church, by the spots of blood that make it singular in the eyes of the universe, to be noble and true. We call upon the redeemed, the blood-besprinkled church, to be incorruptible in its patriotism, noble in its every sentiment, self-sacrificing in disposition, ready to communicate in all things, to emulate the good of the past, that it may leave a legacy, a memorial, that shall cause it to be blessed by generations yet to come.

NOTE.

* On reviewing the character of Nehemiah, we seem unable to find a single fault to counterbalance his many and great virtues. For pure and disinterested patriotism he stands unrivalled. The man whom the account of the misery and ruin of his native country, and the perils with which his countrymen were beset, prompted to leave his splendid banishment, and a post of wealth, power, and influence, in the first court in the world, that he might share and alleviate the sorrows of his native land, must have been pre-eminently a patriot. Every act of his during his government bespeaks one who had no selfishness in his nature. All he did was noble, generous, high-minded, courageous, and to the highest degree upright. But to stern integrity he united great humility and kindness, and a princely hospitality. As a statesman he combined forethought, prudence, and sagacity in counsel with vigour, promptitude, and decision in action. In dealing with the enemies of his country he was wary, penetrating, and bold. In directing the internal economy of the state, he took a comprehensive view of the real welfare of the people, and adopted the measures best calculated to promote it. In dealing whether with friend or foe, he was utterly free from favour or fear, conspicuous for the simplicity with which he aimed only at doing what was right, without respect of persons. But in nothing was he more remarkable than for his piety, and the singleness of eye with which he walked before God. He seems to have undertaken everything in dependence upon God, with prayer for His blessing and guidance, and to have sought his reward only from God.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, thou dost grant unto man special moments: moments in which he sees his immortality, and knows it surely without doubt, and accepts it, not only without reluctance but with gratitude and delight and unutterable joy. If thou wilt grant us one such moment now, we shall be able to enter upon the engagements of the week with a sense of mastery and perfectness of dominion, and the world shall have no power against us. In the recollection of this lofty hour we shall pass through all the perils and engagements of the week as conquerors appointed of God. We ask thee now to open the door of heaven and let us overhear somewhat of the upper music. We ask thee to send a beam of light upon our life that shall enkindle upon it a glory above the brightness of the sun. We ask thee for a visitation of the Holy Spirit that shall animate us, renew our best purposes, recall our ambition from its debasement, and lift us up on high with a sure sense and a perfect and joyous consciousness of our sonship in God. We love the Saviour—we love his name—we gather around his cross, and as we touch it our dead bones live, all our hopes are re-enkindled, our delight is perfect in the Lord Jesus. Seeing therefore that we gather upon Calvary, and that every hand is laid upon the cross, that every heart is open with all its love to give welcome and rest and peace to the Son of God, enable us now to enter into the joy of our Lord. Keep us in the love of the truth—keep us steadfast in thy holy cause—save us from all hesitation, from all doubtfulness and uncertainty of mind—may we know that we rest upon the One Rock—that though the winds blow and the rains fall, yet our house cannot be overthrown. Amen.

Chapter vi.

THE WORK FINISHED.

WE read that Sanballat and Tobiah, and the rest of the enemies of the Jews, invited Nehemiah to a conference in one of the villages in the plain of Ono.

"And I [Nehemiah] sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?" (v. 3).

Do we know what work is? Really very few people have an adequate conception of work. The difficulty which we feel

in going through English life to-day is that certain persons are marked off as belonging to the working-classes. There is, in a certain well-understood sense, no higher aristocracy in any land than the aristocracy of labour; but we must come to something like a sensible and correct definition of work. We have known the secretary of a great religious institution to be at his desk, busy with the papers of the society, at eleven o'clock at night, and back again at his desk, busy with the same papers, at five o'clock in the morning, and this, with very rare intermissions, for weeks and months together. How should we define a man like that? He wears a black coat, he is generally very nice in his personal appearance, and on his hand there is no deeper stain than an occasional drop of ink. We may surely call him a working man. If we can only come to correct definitions of labour, there will be a unanimous sentiment that the working classes are the best classes of all. Nehemiah had a grand conception of work, and that conception was an answer to temptation —was a shield in the day of assault—was a pavilion in the time of peril.

Most people are idle, and when they are idle, what do they do? They look round for an opportunity of amusing themselves, frivolously engaging their attention, and elaborately doing nothing, and getting tired by the fruitless exercise. Do not ask the preacher to give you mere doctrine as an answer to temptation and to the lures of the enemy. Have work to do worthy of your powers. Give yourselves to it night and day: say you are engaged, occupied, forsworn, and have no time to attend to the invitations which may be addressed to you to leave the heights and go down into the valleys.

There are some people who cannot say "no" to an invitation. The fact that they have received an invitation seems to imply that they must accept it. Their reasoning is a very simple process—it would stand roughly thus: "I have been asked to go out—I have been invited to attend—I have received a courteous and most respectful message requesting me to be there, and therefore I must go." Probably in most cases the reasoning is tolerably correct, because the people have nothing else to do.

They are on the outlook for such opportunities—they are listening at the gate for the messenger—they say, "Why doth he delay?" The idle man is always exposed to temptation.

Work is an answer to temptation, work is companionship, work is rest. Let us have occupation, some labour to do: it is a delight to the mind to be conquering some new province of thought, to be preparing oneself for to-morrow's greater fight. We know of no gate so easily opened—nay, verily, that needs no opening at all, for it stands open constantly, and on its bars there are large, loud welcomes—as idleness. Nehemiah had a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other, and his whole soul was devoted to the building of a wall—and to be asked to go down to chatter with Sanballat in the villages was an insult to his earnestness. It fell like a drop of cold water on the burning fire of his patriotic enthusiasm.

It was a stinging answer to Sanballat. Nehemiah magnified his work; he said it was a great work. Let a man get a poor conception of his work, and you may trifle with him, you may get at him through the medium of his vanity; you may say, "Occupation of this kind is unworthy of a man of your genius: why should a man of such herculean power as you possess devote himself to this frivolous engagement? A man like you should be occupied with some far higher concerns; leave this with the contempt it deserves, and seek a nobler sphere worthy of your blazing genius." But let a man feel that his work is *the* work, the right work, the supreme work, the God-given work, and he wears mail from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, which spear and dart and sword cannot penetrate. What is your work? Is it something to which you have to stoop very, very far? Say not so: if it be honest, honourable, there is no stooping about it: it will do to begin with. The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed, and if that great kingdom can so contract itself as to take upon its glory a symbol so humble, surely there is nothing so very lowering in your honest occupation that you need fancy it lies infinite abysses below the capacity and the splendour of your unrivalled powers? He that is faithful in little will be faithful in much. Be right in the village, and thou shalt see the provincial city: be right in the

provincial city, thou shalt see Rome also. The key of every metropolis is on the Master's girdle.

The answer which Nehemiah made to Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian, is the answer which Christianity makes to all controversy. Some men would like to see Christianity going up and down the world with a small weapon ready to assail everybody that had an evil word to say against it. Christianity does nothing of the kind; Christianity is a gospel, not an argument; Christianity is a revelation, not a contention only; Christianity is a redemption, a baptism of blood, not an unholy fray, a chatter with evil speakers, a war of words with souls that mistake their own ignorance for the philosophy of the universe. The preacher should meddle but little with merely controversial topics. We would have him true to his gospel; we would have him take up the silver trumpet and blow it sweetly, loudly, resonantly, that every soul might hear that the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which is lost; and we would have that word "lost" so rung out of the trumpet that on farthest shore and in densest forest the prodigal might hear it and accept it as a welcome to his Father's house. Are you somewhere down in the plain, pining over Christianity, and saying that you have doubts and difficulties in your mind regarding the philosophy of redemption, and you want some man to come and join you at your dinner in order to talk it out? The answer of the earnest man will be, "I am doing a great work, and I cannot come down." You must go up in your thinking, in your inquiries; you must lift up the whole level and scale of your nature, start your investigation from a higher point, if ever you are to get at the truth as it is in Christ Jesus. If you have felt the bitterness of sin, you have so far become prepared to taste the sweetness of grace; if you have known guilt as a burden, then you have so far prepared yourself to hear of this gospel—"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you—rest." But if your guilt has not yet become a burden, if it is some cloud lying off on the far horizon at which you can take a furtive glance now and then and keep at a distance from you, then there is nothing in all the great swelling, bursting heart of Christ to touch such as you. When that cloud comes round, thickens, rolls out, shapes itself

as if coming in your direction—comes nearer, touches you, crushes you—then you will be in the right mood of mind and heart to hear the gospel that Jesus Christ came into the world for the express purpose of lifting off such burdens as these, and you will be filled with great joy, as were those who listened to the annunciation song of the angels when they said that a Prince and a Saviour was born in the city of David.

We would have the Christian preacher keep to his doctrine, to his positive text, to his distinct and affirmative gospel, and we would have all men know that it is folly to forsake a positive advantage for an uncertain good. Let us leave it to fabled dogs to snatch the shadow in the stream. There are some three or four things about Jesus Christ that we do know—concerning which there can be no controversy; with all the tendrils of your love, with all the energies of your mind, get hold of these, and say to carping Pharisee and to mocking pagan, "One thing I know, whereas I was blind, now I see." You know that Jesus Christ lived, and never lived for himself, and never shrank from labour —never spake a belittling word, never took a narrow view, never sent a soul empty away, never spoke harshly to contrite hearts and to weeping eyes—said to a poor sister, "Go, and sin no more." The Man that did these things must be saved from the blasphemy of tormentors, and must be saved from the vexation of merely technical controversy.

Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian, were not easily put off. Neither are our enemies. They sent four times to Nehemiah, and four times Nehemiah answered them after the same manner. Then they made a fifth attempt—this time with an open letter in the hand of a servant. The fact that a letter was open had great signification to a Jew, for the Jew, having written a letter and closed it, wrote upon the outside, in Hebrew, curses, anathemas, maledictions upon the man that should trifle with the seal.* In this case they did not use the seal—they sent a servant with an open letter, intimating to Nehemiah that they did not care who knew the contents, because, as a matter of fact, the purposes of Nehemiah were very well understood to be

* See note, *post*, p. 263.

purposes of high treason: that Nehemiah was making a throne for himself, preparing to ascend that throne as the king of the Jews, and making all arrangements consistent with the theory of his procuratorship. Nehemiah took the letter and read:

"It is reported among the heathen, and Gashmu [or Geshem (v. 2)] saith it, that thou and the Jews think to rebel: for which cause thou buildest the wall, that thou mayest be their king, according to these words. And thou hast also appointed prophets to preach of thee at Jerusalem, saying, There is a king in Judah: and now shall it be reported to the king according to these words. Come now, therefore, let us take counsel together" (vv. 6, 7).

Most men would have been alarmed by this letter. There is something alarming about a letter at any time. We never know what it may contain; and if we have reason to fear any person under the sun, it is impossible for us to look at a letter in the hands of the postman without beginning to tremble, and saying mentally, "It has come at last—I thought it would."

Nehemiah took the letter without misgiving. The man who left Persia under the circumstances with which we have become familiar, to recover Zion from contempt and to rebuild Jerusalem, is not likely to be overawed by the letter of a pagan correspondent, and he sent this brave answer: "There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart." It was an answer that might have been shot from a musket. Never attempt to make graceful, apologetic, explanatory statements to your controversial and spiritual enemy. Short answers—cannon-ball replies—"It is written—it is written"—and the devil, Beelzebub, will reel under every blow. A long and elaborate argument is a long and elaborate opportunity for the devil to take advantage of. Let us give short, clear-cut, terse, concise answers, and we can find them ready for use in God's armoury: "Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and, having done all, to stand."

There are always people in the world who can explain everything, who can account for Nehemiah's industry, and trace a man's motive through all possible metaphysical labyrinths and windings. There are persons who know exactly why we attend

this place and not that. There can be but one Omniscience; and in proportion as Sanballat attempts the blasphemous game of Omnisciency does he prepare himself for his last, his irrecoverable fall. If Sanballat had said that these reports were about, and he could not help hearing of them, he would have been very English in his method of escaping from an awkward position. There are friends of ours—so called by a rare and cruel stretch of courtesy, who are always in the way of hearing disagreeable things. They are nice, innocent people, but somehow they always happen to be at the corner of that particular street where gossips most do congregate; and they, with touching innocence, with pathetic self-renunciation, tell us that they could not help hearing such and such reports. They could have helped repeating them!

What did Nehemiah do? He had another turn in prayer. Good old man—brave old soldier-builder; always giving the upward look, always sending out of his heart a heavenward cry; so we hear him now, saying, "Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands." The inward man must be renewed day by day—we must have little upon little, precept upon precept, line upon line, sermon upon sermon, prayer upon prayer; there is no one final exercise in the Christian economy; ours is an economy that rivals the Judaic ritual itself in the multiplicity of its details; in the constancy of its homage, in the fidelity and continuance of its oblations. Nehemiah did not live upon yesterday's grace: day by day he spoke his prayer, moment by moment he breathed the air of heaven. He prayed with ejaculation, that is with an out-throwing of the soul; with suddenness, as if he had surprised God by an unexpected cry. To live so is to do what the apostle enjoins us to do—pray without ceasing.

He came to the house of a certain man, Shemaiah son of Delaiah, and that man proposed to Nehemiah that Nehemiah should go into the temple—then he would be safe.

"Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple [inside the main building of the temple, which it was not lawful for any but the priests and Levites to enter], and let us shut the doors of the temple: for they will come to slay thee; yea, in the night will they come to slay thee" (v. 10).

Nehemiah will not go into the temple for an unworthy purpose.

He says, "It is all temple, if I be right." "Should," said he, "such a man as I flee? I will not go in." The whole creation is God's pavilion if thou desire to be right and to be his servant; and if not, the universe will not give thee lodgment; the pillared firmament is rottenness, and earth's base built on stubble, if thy soul be not true to great principles and sacred convictions. Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? That is the question which terrifies the bad man. Whither shall I flee from thy presence? is an inquiry which is itself a sanctuary to the soul that is pure and just.

"So the wall was finished" (v. 15).

Nehemiah was but one man; he wept when he heard the tale which Hanani brought to him: he trembled when he went into the presence of King Artaxerxes and offered him the customary wine: he came out to work and he was encountered by hostility of the severest kind—and we might have said, "In the hands of this man the great wall of Jerusalem never can be rebuilt." But he kept on and on, saying, So we laboured at the work; so we toiled at the wall; and so the wall was finished. How? By magnificent leadership, by cordial union, under the greatest discouragements and notwithstanding the fiercest hostility. To every man we say: Thou hast a wall to build; a wall thrown down, the copestone thereof lost—it is the wall of thy character, the wall of thyself; and Sanballat, the enemy—call him by what name you please, for he is a perpetual foe—says thou shalt not build it with his consent. He will mock thee, taunt thee, tempt thee, curse thee; wilt thou be foiled? What is thy hope—in thine own genius—in thine own resources? Nay, say, constantly, toiling man, character-builder—"My soul, hope thou only in God."

NOTE.

Nehemiah's great work was rebuilding, for the first time since their destruction by Nebuzaradan, the walls of Jerusalem, and restoring that city to its former state and dignity as a fortified town. It is impossible to overestimate the importance to the future political and ecclesiastical prosperity of the Jewish nation of this great achievement of their patriotic governor. How low the community of the Palestine Jews had fallen is apparent from the fact that from the sixth of Darius to the seventh of Artaxerxes there is no

history of them whatever; and that even after Ezra's commission and the ample grants made by Artaxerxes in his seventh year, and the considerable reinforcements, both in wealth and numbers, which Ezra's government brought to them, they were in a state of abject "affliction and reproach" in the twentieth of Artaxerxes; their country pillaged, their citizens kidnapped and made slaves of by their heathen neighbours, robbery and murder rife in their very capital, Jerusalem almost deserted, and the Temple falling again into decay. The one step which could resuscitate the nation, preserve the Mosaic institutions, and lay the foundation of future independence was the restoration of the city walls. Jerusalem being once again secure from the attacks of the marauding heathen, civil government would become possible, the spirit of the people, and their attachment to the ancient capital of the monarchy would revive, the priests and Levites would be encouraged to come into residence, the tithes and first-fruits and other stores would be safe, and Judah, if not actually independent, would preserve the essentials of national and religious life. To this great object therefore Nehemiah directed his whole energies without an hour's unnecessary delay. [The three days, mentioned Nehem. ii. 11 and Ezra vii. 32, seems to point to some customary interval, perhaps for purification after a journey.] By word and example he induced the whole population, with the single exception of the Tekoite nobles, to commence building with the utmost vigour, even the lukewarm high-priest Eliashib performing his part. In a wonderfully short time the walls seemed to emerge from the heaps of burnt rubbish, and to encircle the city as in the days of old. The gateways also were rebuilt, and ready for the doors to be hung upon them. But it soon became apparent how wisely Nehemiah had acted in hastening on the work. On his very first arrival as governor, Sanballat and Tobiah had given unequivocal proof of their mortification at his appointment; and, before the work was even commenced had scornfully asked whether he intended to rebel against the king of Persia. But when the restoration was seen to be rapidly progressing, their indignation knew no bounds. They not only poured out a torrent of abuse and contempt upon all engaged in the work, but actually made a great conspiracy to fall upon the builders with an armed force and put a stop to the undertaking. The project was defeated by the vigilance and prudence of Nehemiah, who armed all the people after their families, and showed such a strong front that their enemies dared not attack them. This armed attitude was continued from that day forward.

Chapter vii.

[Measures were taken (1-4) for the security of the city, now made a complete fortress. The comparative thinness of the population taxed the governor's resources, and the result appears at a later stage.]

1. Now it came to pass, when the wall was built, and I had set up the doors [comp. vi. 1], and the porters and the singers and the Levites were appointed [placed in charge, probably over the walls. Bishop ELLICOTT's *Commentary* says: This was an extraordinary provision, to be explained by the fact that these organised bodies formed a large portion of the inhabitants. The Levites had usually guarded only the Temple].

2. That I gave my brother Hanani [who probably had returned from Susa (see i. 2)], and Hananiah the ruler of the palace [commander of the fortress], charge over Jerusalem: for he [Hananiah] was a faithful man, and feared God above many.

3. And I said unto them, Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun be hot [an unusual precaution. The ordinary practice in the East is to open town gates at sunrise]; and while they stand by, let them shut the doors, and bar them: and appoint watches of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, every one in his watch, and every one to be over against his house.

4. Now the city was large and great [*lit.* broad on both sides]: but the people were few * therein, and the houses were not builded.

5. ¶ And my God put into mine heart to gather together the nobles, and the rulers, and the people, that they might be reckoned by genealogy. And I found a register of the genealogy of them which came up at the first, and found written therein, . . .

[It is argued by some that the entire catalogue which follows (7–73) is not the register of them "which came up *at the first*," but of the Jewish people in Nehemiah's time; that it stands in Nehemiah in its right place; and that it has been improperly transferred to Ezra ii. The genealogical reckoning of the people, as the first step towards increasing the population of the metropolis, is determined on, not without express divine suggestion; the allusion to this inspiration from God is, as in chap. ii. 12, very emphatic.]

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* The number of those who returned with Zerubbabel was no more than 42,360 (Ezra ii. 64; Nehem. vii. 66). With Ezra had come less than 2,000 (Ezra viii. 1–20). This scanty population of under 50,000 persons was spread over the whole of Judea from Bethel to Beersheba (Nehem. xi. 30, 31). Yet it was hardly more than sufficient to furnish Jerusalem with its normal population, which is estimated at from 40,000 to 50,000.—*The Speaker's Commentary.*

63. ¶ And of the priests: the children of Habaiah, the children of Koz, the children of Barzillai, which took one of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite [see 2 Sam. xvii. 27; xix. 31–39] to wife, and was called after their name.

64. These sought their register among those that were reckoned by genealogy, but it was not found: therefore were they, as polluted [*Heb.* they were polluted from the priesthood], put from the priesthood.

65. And the Tirshatha [*or*, governor] said unto them, that they should not eat of the most holy things [*i.e.* have their share of the offerings, on which the priests subsisted (see Lev. ii. 2, 10; xxii. 4, 10)], till there stood up a priest with Urim [Exod. xxviii. 30] and Thummim.

66. ¶ The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore,

67. Beside their manservants and their maidservants, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven: and they had two hundred forty and five singing men and singing women.

68. Their horses, seven hundred thirty and six: their mules, two hundred forty and five:

69. Their camels, four hundred thirty and five: six thousand seven hundred and twenty asses.

70. ¶ And some [*Heb.* part] of the chief of the fathers gave unto the work. The Tirshatha gave to the treasure a thousand drams of gold, fifty basons, five hundred and thirty priests' garments.

71. And some of the chief of the fathers gave to the treasure of the work twenty thousand drams of gold, and two thousand and two hundred pound of silver.

72. And that which the rest of the people gave was twenty thousand drams of gold, and two thousand pound of silver, and threescore and seven priests' garments.

73. So the priests, and the Levites, and the porters, and the singers, and some of the people, and the Nethinims [sacred slaves "given" to the Levites to assist them in their work], and all Israel, dwelt in their cities;* and when the seventh month came, the children of Israel were in their cities.

* Nehemiah's quotation from Zerubbabel's register here comes to an end, and the narration of events in Jerusalem in his own day is resumed from verse 3. The narrative (chaps. viii.–x.), says *The Speaker's Commentary*, appears from internal evidence to be by a different author, whom some suppose to be Ezra; but this is more than doubtful.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, do thou open our eyes that we may behold wondrous things out of thy law. The law of the Lord is perfect, enlightening the eyes, and guiding the simple, and comforting the soul, and making heaven on earth. O that we knew thy law, and hearkened unto thy precepts, and made thy statutes our song in the house of our pilgrimage! We would now pray thee for the spirit of truth—the fearless, noble, upright spirit—that we may daily make inquest for truth, and inquire the way to the palaces of wisdom, and discover the dwelling-place of understanding. We would seek for wisdom as men seek for silver and dig for gold; we would go after understanding until we find it. We have seen somewhat of the value of wisdom: the fear of the Lord is the beginning thereof, the continuance thereof, and the end thereof. May we fear God with a whole heart; may we know the highest fear, the reverence of love; may we see so clearly the holiness of God that we may tremble before it, and then see so vividly the mercy of God that we may take heart again and venture to pray.

Here we are in the battle, here we are thrown into relationships we can neither understand nor control; here we are the subjects and sometimes the victims of cruel or startling surprises, but in God's eternity, we shall find the key, the light, the explanation, and shall say, Thou hast done all things well. The lion was one of our teachers, the wolf was set in our path to keep us right: if thou didst bite us with the gnawing tooth of hunger, it was that we might cry out for the living bread; and if thou didst enclose us in the wilderness too large for a home, too bleak for summer, it was that we might feel our hearts going out towards our Father, and his house, and all the sanctuary of his presence. Thou hast done all things well. The death was right, and the birth, and the glad wedding, and the stress and fury and torment of unexpected conflict: thou hast done all things well. We had planned life otherwise; it was to be a wedding feast from beginning to end; we were to live within the sound of music; we were to know nought of darkness or frown or trouble: but thou hast done all things well. We would not now part with the little grave or with the tomb where old age lies, consecrating the earth with another touch of sanctity; we would not be without the wound, the scar, the brand, the stigma, all these we now see are part of thy gift, and a method of thine in the instruction of the world: thou hast done all things well.

We bless thee for thy book: it is all books in one; there is nothing outside of it that can claim the name of truth and beauty, loveliness and purity, that is not to be found within its golden circle. May we search it, inquire into it, make it our familiar friend and counsellor. Blessed is the

man whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates therein day and night; he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water; to him there shall be no drought, to him there shall be no sere leaf; he shall bear fruit, and always shall be beautiful because of God's benediction. The ungodly are not so; they have no book; they are the victims of their own passions and fancies; they are driven away like chaff before the wind. Establish us in truth. Thy word is truth: Son of God, expound it to us; Holy Spirit take of the things of Christ, and show them unto us. O thou who didst walk with sad-hearted men to Emmaus, join us on our pilgrimages, and beginning at Moses, and all the prophets, expound unto us the things concerning thyself; and we shall know the speaker by the glowing love that burns in our hearts. Amen.

Chapter viii.

1. And all the people gathered themselves together as one man [the unanimity rather than the number is emphatic here] into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra [who appears in this book for the first time, having probably been at the court for twelve years] the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded Israel.

2. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding [men, women, and children who had reached years of discretion], upon the first day of the seventh month. [As the seventh was the most important month, in a religious sense, so the first day, the Feast of Trumpets, was the most important new moon (Lev. xxiii. 24).]

3. And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning [from daylight] until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law.

4. And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood [*lit.* a tower of wood. Fourteen persons, however, were on what is afterwards called a platform, or stair, by his side], which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, and Shema, and Anaiah, and Urijah, and Hilkiah, and Maaseiah, on his right hand; and on his left hand, Pedaiah, and Mishael, and Malchiah, and Hashum, and Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam.

5. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up:

6. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

7. Also Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place.

8. So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense [expounded obscurer passages (see note, *post*, p. 246)], and caused them to understand the reading.

PREACHING AND HEARING.

THE month was the most important month in all the year, viewed from a religious standpoint; and the day was the most important day in that supreme ecclesiastical month. The time, therefore, was favourable. There is help in circumstances.

Here is a splendid popular demand—"all the people gathered themselves together as one man, . . . and they spake unto Ezra the scribe, to bring the book of the law of Moses." That demand will be one day repeated. There is no book so much neglected now as "the book of the law"—whether it come in the form of Mosaic statute, or evangelical injunction. It is hurried over, read perfunctorily; most of it is read at times, taking all the year round: but the people have not yet risen in all their magnitude, in all the pomp of their simplicity, in all the eagerness of their hunger, and demanded to have the Bible read. So practically there is no Bible: it is read in patches and portions; the great circle of it is not measured, the full weight of it is not felt; its dignity is broken up into fragments and sections. We may call it poetry and drama, and acute interpretation of human nature, but the time will come when the people will say, Is there nothing written upon the subject of oppression, unrighteousness, illtreatment, injustice, slavery? Has no man ever spoken about this? Has God sent no message from heaven about it? If he has, where is it? Read it! There is a kind of inspiration in hunger. When men speak out of felt necessity, they speak loudly; they do not muffle their tone so as not to be heard, but they speak poignantly, emphatically, pathetically, most audibly, and what is wanting in mere vocal strength is made up in repetition. The rock is not shattered by a stroke, but by repercussion. Blessed will that day be when the people spring to their feet in the consciousness that somewhere there must be law—a right word, a healing message, syllables that should be strokes of anger upon all evil, tones that must be music to all broken hearts. The Bible can wait. It is an awful book to read all through. It is very beautiful in pieces; there are in the Bible portions of writing which are like little green valleys through which blue

streams are running, and we dwell in those valleys, and say, How sweet is God's word! But great suffering, sorrowing, dying humanity cannot find a way into such green valleys; there are beasts to be fought, there are hills to be climbed, there are hot days to be endured and heavy burdens to be carried, and the Bible makes provision for all. This a book for the open public quarter; this is a book for the ancient church. A book that can wait until the people need it, will be read when they feel that someone has yet to speak the right word. One day men will get tired even of journals, and parliaments, and sectarian churches, and partial institutions, and nostrums of every kind; and then they will cry out for the living God.

Here is a properly constituted congregation—"the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding," including servants and children—which no church yet includes. Only the open air can hold such an audience. It was a large assemblage,—"The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore, beside their manservants and their maidservants." It is difficult to count them as "men and women." Many dreamers have done so; some fools have made that mistake. The Bible includes us all. When we get together the Bible looks upon us and says,—If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not yearn after it, and go after it, and fetch it back again? Go and do the same thing! What we want is family worship; so every one in the house should be there. "Men and women," "manservants," "maidservants,"—all who could catch the meaning. That is most extraordinary! On great occasions, not little theatrical occasions where there is much trumpeting and a long *menu* and bad serving, but on great occasions, heroic, superb, morally sublime, we hear nothing about philosophers, poets, well-educated persons, fellows of colleges, but "men and women." We cannot get the "men and women" to church. They will come one day. Now we get official persons, scribes, pharisees, semi-philosophers, budding geniuses, embryonic agnostics, speculators, gifted men, persons largely certificated. Put thy shoes from off thy feet! When thou comest into God's house, leave outside as much as possible—all decoration and

transient distinction, and ambition and pride, and sense of conquest and sense of dignity, and come into God's house to hear God's book, broken-heartedly, penitently, in a docile spirit, saying, Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth; Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? Tell me thy will; make my heart understand it, and make me obedient to all its claims. We should then have profitable hearing, because we should then get down to the broad human line. The preacher cannot get at the man because of the fashions: he is befeathered and decorated and wrapped round with coloured bandages, or he is internally preoccupied with prejudices, ignorance, self-will, vanity. Somehow we cannot get at the naked needy heart. It would be convenient to blame circumstances, but it would be not only convenient, it would be unjust. "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled." That is the promise; these are the simple conditions. If we fill our ears with the cotton-wool of prejudice and self-will, we should hear nothing but noise. Circumcise your hearts, circumcise your ears; want to hear the truth, and you will catch its solemn tone.

Here is a thorough Bible reading,—"And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday." Who will do that now? The church is draughty—let us get out of it as soon as we can! It is often draughty in the open air too. "From the morning until midday." How hungry they were! How plentifully they regaled themselves on heaven's bread! Blessed now above all the sons of men is the man who can preach briefly. His renown is from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same. Who could bear to hear one of Paul's epistles read right through at any service? This can only occur as a thorough exercise in Bible-reading when the people are prepared for it. There is no book like the Bible; again and again we have said, it has everything in it. The last novel that touches the truth of human life is in the Bible. But this cannot be realised except by long, continuous, patient, exhaustive reading. Sometimes when starting upon a walk we feel as if we should make it a short one, for we are weary and disinclined to exercise; but the sun shines brightly and the air is fresh, and we purpose to advance at least to yonder corner, and then we feel a

little better and proceed still further; then the blood begins freely to circulate, and we get all our powers into action, and resolutely say, We must make a long walk of this; this day is to be eaten up as food is eaten by a hungry man; this is a vision of light, and must be gazed upon; this is a great gift from heaven. Hour after hour passes, and every field is Eden and every prospect tinged with heaven. It is so with God's book: we begin at the right place, and read on, and we want to see what occurs after that, and then, and what next. There have been men who have been so fascinated that they have read the book almost at one sitting; then they knew whether the book was of heaven or of earth. We want thorough Bible-reading, systematic study of the Scriptures. But men cannot endure it. There have been congregations that have been lessened because the minister persisted in reading God's book. But on some we must "have compassion, making a difference." That little word occurs in the scorching judgment-letter of Jude.

Here is a properly supported ministry. In verse 4, we find that Ezra is not alone. Ezra stood upon a pulpit—that is, upon a tower—of wood: but there were men on the right hand and men on the left hand, and they stood there in significant attitude, saying, We are with this man; his is the one voice, ours is the unanimous sympathy. Thus should it be with every congregation. The single reader should feel that he is speaking for a multitude. One pleading voice should realise that it is uttering the need of humanity or speaking the Gospel of Christ. Men should assist at every service. There should at least be a God bless you! when the minister is most commonplace, for then he may have gone a long way down to heal some heart whose education is backward. If we pine pedantically for dazzling and overwhelming originality, we have ceased to be men, and have become but mere figures, ill-regulated and ill-furnished dramatists at best. Every sermon cannot be for every man. There are portions of Scripture which we do not need every day. But when any portion of Scripture is read or expounded there should be wise people in the congregation who should say, Though we do not at this moment personally need this testimony, there are some who do need it: Lord, open their

eyes, and their understanding, and their hearts, that thy message may not be in vain.

Here is a significant act,—"And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people." There is no sublimer act in the education of the world! Not a word does Ezra say. The Church has a Bible written for it. It might be convenient if we could publish a Bible as we publish a newspaper. But here again providence has denied us that idle convenience. Law cannot be new; law cannot be a child of time. Law comes up from eternity, and is always new because it is always old. It is after all a grand thing, ideally and symbolically, that there are towers of wood, pulpits of stone, or platforms of significant width, on which a man may stand, and there open the book in the sight of all the people. We are so familiar with the scene that we do not look at it. But there may be moments when we scrutinise the deeper meanings of things, and in those moments many an act which has become a commonplace will be a reality most vivid and blessed. So it is with the opening of the Bible, that ought to be one of the greatest things in the world. It is nothing. But it shall regain its place. The clasping of the hands that we were used to in childhood shall come to be an attitude of adoration valued by the angels. Do not let us allow all these things to fall into desuetude as if we had advanced beyond their necessity. All these deep human experiences and aspirations are not the creatures of circumstances: they bear upon them divine attestation.

Here is united worship:

"And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen" (v. 6).

That was responsive worship. Some churches have responsive worship now, and I like it; it seems to me to be right, ideally and sympathetically. If there is anything wrong it must be an unresponsive people, a dumb host. Yet true responsiveness can hardly be planned; it is really not a piece of mechanism; it should be spontaneous, enthusiastic, impressive. If a man is told to say Amen, there is nothing in his saying it, necessarily; there is only in it what he may put into it: but if a man here and

there should say Amen, in the midst of a prayer or a discourse, it should not be looked upon as an eccentricity. The eccentric thing, viewed upon a large plane, is monotony. Tell it not among the angels that there are people who can sit in thousands and hear the most burning and tender words of the Lord's book, and never answer even with a sigh. We have driven enthusiasm out of the Church. We are never weary of declaring that fact, for it is one of the saddest facts in human history.

Here is the right object of reading—"to understand the law."

"So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading" * (v. 8).

There the expositor came in, or the preacher, or the rhetorician —that ever-condemned and ever-dreaded person, the rhetorician. That man must have committed murder somewhere; he is so universally disliked. And the voice of the people is said—in Latin at least—to be the voice of God. What did they do—"So

* From the necessity of explaining the Hebrew Scriptures, it is plain that the language of the people had materially changed during the residence in Babylonia. The original people of Babylonia were Cushites (Gen. x. 8–10); this is proved by many inscriptions of older date than the Assyrian kingdom, which are in an Ethiopian (Cushite) dialect. During the supremacy of Nineveh, all inscriptions cease in Babylonia; when they reappear 1,000 years later, they are found in a Shemitish dialect, evidently owing to the influence of Nineveh, which was occupied by a Shemitish race. This language is called the Chaldee, and in it the later books of the Bible were written. Gesenius finds traces of this dialect, more or less evident and abundant, in the following Biblical books:—1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Jonah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Daniel, Ecclesiastes, Canticles, and some of the Psalms. There is evidence in the New Testament that this Chaldee dialect was the common spoken dialect of the Jewish people up to the taking of Jerusalem by Titus, A.D. 74, when their dispersion in many lands led to the exchanging of it for the dialects of the Gentiles.

Such expressions as Talitha Cumi; Abba; Ephphatha; Eli, Eli, lama Sabachthani, belonging to this dialect, are retained in the Gospels, and when our Lord quoted Isa. lxi. 1, in his visit to the synagogue at Nazareth, he must have read it in the Chaldee version, since we find his words are neither those of the Hebrew original nor of the Greek Septuagint translation. For several centuries after the Babylonish captivity, it was the regular custom in the synagogues to read first out of the Hebrew Scriptures, and then give the interpretation in the Chaldee dialect; in later times the Chaldee Targums, or paraphases, were used.—*Biblical Things not Generally Known.*

they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense,"—either vocally or expositionally; for a tone may be a comment, a pause may be an annotation—"and caused them to understand the reading." He preaches well who expounds well; who grapples with his text, and unfolds its secret; who makes the text the sermon, who makes the sermon an amplified text, a vivid, impressive paraphrase. That kind of preaching is not popular. An anecdote will beat it out of the field any day. Let us keep to the law, the written book: what scope for learning! what room for genius! what an opportunity for all the gamut of human emotion and attainment! Some day the pulpit will be natural; then it will make the theatre ashamed of itself, and make all persons who love music hasten to it and press to it, and draw all souls that love reality within its magic touch; then in church men shall laugh and cry, and applaud and stand up, and shout and praise the Lord, and fall into silence more eloquent than speech. To-day the pulpit is a prison.

Behold the happy end of the whole service—"The people wept when they heard the words of the law." That is the right issue of true reading. Weep in hearing a law: is there not a contradiction of terms there? When men hear law do they not stand upright and stiffen themselves, and become resentful or critical or self-defensive? That depends upon how the law is read. The ten commandments might be so read as to make people feel the tears welling into their eyes. We are bad readers. We should make the law sound like gospel. Nehemiah would not have this altogether, so the people were told thus:

"Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength. So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be ye grieved. And all the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them" (vv. 10–12).

Great religious services should end in great festivals.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, thou hast sent thy prophets unto us to teach us the Eternal Word: we bless thee for their fearlessness, their unselfishness, their unworldiness: may we hear their voice and answer it, not as the voice of man, but as the voice of God. There is music in their tone even when it is a tone of judgment. Yet by them hast thou published gospels to the world, great offers of love, great declarations of mercy; thou hast taught thy prophets to write thy tears, thy heart, thine all-encompassing and ever-enduring mercy. So in this Old Testament we find the New, in the prophecy we find the Gospel, in the ancient time we find the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world. Thy Book is full of Calvary, the whole revelation is instinct with the spirit of the cross. For this purpose we search the Scriptures that we may find the Lord's only begotten and well-beloved Son, and put our trust in him who is the Wisdom of God, and the Power and the Righteousness of God, and who is the world's eternal Saviour. Thou bringest us through all the years one by one; the little day comes in its cloud and vanishes, and the long summer day withdraws its radiant smile, and the year rises and flourishes, and dies and vanishes: this is the way of time; this is the sign of the Lord's movement. Thou art withdrawing time that thou mayest introduce eternity; thou art teaching us through the little the measure and the value of the great. Oh that men were wise, that they understood these things, that they would consider their latter end; that they would know that God is not taking them from their days but preparing for them their immortality. Regard the pilgrim who when he lays his staff down does not know whether he will live to take it up again, so near is he the other land: the little child, all wonder and surprise and beauty, all ignorance and all trust; feed the little life and nourish it, and if father and mother could forsake it by some miracle of baseness do thou take it up into thine own arms, for it is thine, not theirs; the sick, the ailing, the ill at ease, the weary, the helpless, those who have to encounter the black mysteries of life; not the enigmas of philosophy, but the tragedies of intolerable experience: wanderers that have no home, to whom society would hardly give a foothold, outcasts to whom the day is as the night, and the night as the day, and who are ill and base and villainous because of pressure they cannot resist, who have no chance of being their better selves, and who think that to pray would be to blaspheme. Good Lord, such is thy little world, such is our work in it: to this end have we brought a world built for music, and fashioned for order and knowledge and progress. Great Saviour of the world, teach us from thy cross; thou canst do this, thou wilt do it; that hope may return to our night-world and set some star of shining in its darkness. Bless all thy ministering servants at

home and abroad: call them up into the mountain once more, and ordain them again; fill their souls with heavenly music; bring their hearts into sympathy with the passion of the cross; anoint them with the unction from on high, and make them strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And as for merchantmen, enable them to do their business as men would partake of sacrament; may life be holy to them, and righteousness be the light of their day. And as for the housewife whose business lies within the little four walls, the wondrous school, the wondrous sphere of discipline and trial, and sorrow and joy, the Lord's blessing will not be withheld, the Lord's blessing will be doubled even to overflowing. Hear us for all churches, all sections of the Church, the whole redeemed Church throughout the world, the great missionary Church. Hear us for those in trouble and peril on the sea. Hear us for all mankind, O thou whose cross is high as heaven, and whose outstretched arms touch the utmost range and bound of life and time. Amen.

Chapter ix.

1. Now in the twenty and fourth day of this month [ch. viii. 2] the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth upon them [Comp. 1 Sam. iv. 12; 2 Sam. xv. 32, etc.].

2. And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers [*Heb.* strange children], and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers.

3. And they stood up in their place, and read [*i.e.* engaged in the reading of the law. The actual readers were no doubt Levites (see ch. viii. 3–8)] in the book of the law of the Lord their God one fourth part of the day; and another fourth part they confessed, and worshipped the Lord their God.

4. ¶ Then stood up upon the stairs [or scaffold], of the Levites, Jeshua, and Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani, and cried with a loud voice unto the Lord their God.

5. Then the Levites, Jeshua, and Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabniah, Sherebiahc Hodijah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said, Stand up [the people had knelt to confess and worship God (ver. 3). They were now to take the attitude proper of praise], and bless the Lord your God for ever and ever: and blessed be thy glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.

6. Thou, even thou, art Lord alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host [cf. Gen. ii. 1], the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all [*lit.* thou givest them life]; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee [*i.e.* the angels (see 1 Kings xxii. 19; Psalm ciii. 21)].

7. Thou art the Lord the God, who didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gavest him the name of Abraham

8. And foundest his heart faithful before thee, and madest a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, and Perizzites, and the Jebusites, and the Girgashites, to give it, I say, to his seed, and hast performed thy words; for thou art righteous:

9. And didst see the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heardest their cry by the Red sea;

10. And shewedst signs and wonders upon Pharaoh, and on all his servants, and on all the people of his land: for thou knewest that they dealt proudly [the same phrase is used by Jethro (Exod. xviii. 11)] against them. So didst thou get thee a name [comp. Exod. ix. 16], as it is this day.

11. And thou didst divide the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on the dry land; and their persecutors thou threwest into the deeps, as a stone into the mighty waters [*rather*, into mighty waters, *or*, into fierce waters].

12. Moreover thou leddest them in the day by a cloudy pillar; and in the night by a pillar of fire, to give them light in the way wherein they should go.

13. Thou camest down also upon mount Sinai, and spakest with them from heaven, and gavest them right judgments, and true laws, good statutes and commandments:

14. And madest known unto them thy holy sabbath, and commandest them precepts, statutes, and laws, by the hand of Moses thy servant:

15. And gavest them bread from heaven for their hunger, and broughtest forth water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and promisedst them that they should go in to possess the land which thou hadst sworn to give them.

16. But they and our fathers dealt proudly, and hardened their necks, and hearkened not to thy commandments,

17. And refused to obey, neither were mindful of thy wonders that thou didst among them; but hardened their necks, and in their rebellion appointed a captain to return to their bondage: but thou art a God ready to pardon [*Heb.* a God of pardons], gracious and merciful, slow to anger [cf. Joel ii. 13] and of great kindness, and forsookest them not.

18. Yea, when they had made them a molten calf, and said, This is thy God that brought thee up out of Egypt, and had wrought great provocations;

19. Yet thou in thy manifold mercies forsookest them not in the wilderness: the pillar of the cloud departed not from them by day, to lead them in the way; neither the pillar of fire by night, to show them light, and the way wherein they should go.

20. Thou gavest also thy good spirit to instruct them [. Psalm xxxii. 8 and cxliii. 10. This truth is not openly announced in the Pentateuch], and withheldest not thy manna from their mouth, and gavest them water for their thirst.

21. Yea, forty years didst thou sustain them in the wilderness, so that they lacked nothing; their clothes waxed not old, and their feet swelled not.

22. Moreover thou gavest them kingdoms and nations, and didst divide them into corners [*rather*, thou didst distribute them on all sides]: so they possessed the land of Sihon, and the land of the king of Heshbon, and the land of Og king of Bashan.

23. Their children also multipliedst thou as the stars of heaven [cf. Gen. xxii. 17], and broughtest them into the land, concerning which thou hadst promised to their fathers, that they should go in to possess it.

24. So the children went in and possessed the land, and thou subduedst before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gavest them

into their hands, with their kings, and the people of the land, that they might do with them as they would [*Heb.* according to their will].

25. And they took strong cities, and a fat land, and possessed houses full of all goods [see Deut. vi. 11], wells [*or*, cisterns] digged, vineyards, and oliveyards, and fruit trees [*Heb.* tree of food] in abundance: so they did eat, and were filled, and became fat [*i.e.* grew proud, or wanton—a rare phrase, only occurring here and in two other places, Deut. xxxii. 15; Jer. v. 28], and delighted themselves [luxuriated] in thy great goodness.

26. Nevertheless they were disobedient, and rebelled against thee, and cast thy law behind their backs, and slew thy prophets which testified against them to turn them to thee, and they wrought great provocations.

27. Therefore thou deliveredst them into the hand of their enemies, who vexed them: and in the time of their trouble, when they cried unto thee, thou heardest them from heaven; and according to thy manifold mercies thou gavest them saviours [see Judg. iii. 9, 15 (where Othniel and Ehad are called "saviours"), and comp. Judg. iv. 6-24; vi. 12, etc.], who saved them out of the hand of their enemies.

28. But after they had rest [cf. the frequent phrase, "and the land had rest," in Judges (iii. 11, 30; v. 31; viii. 28)], they did evil again before thee: therefore leftest thou them in the hand of their enemies, so that they had their dominion over them: yet when they returned, and cried unto thee, thou heardest them from heaven; and many times didst thou deliver them according to thy mercies;

29. And testifiedst against them, that thou mightest bring them again unto thy law: yet they dealt proudly, and hearkened not unto thy commandments, but sinned against thy judgments, (which if a man do [these words are taken from Lev. xviii. 5] he shall live in them;) and withdrew the shoulder [cf. Zech. vii. 11], and hardened their neck, and would not hear.

30. Yet many years didst thou forbear them, and testifiedst against them by thy spirit in thy prophets: yet would they not give ear: therefore gavest thou them into the hand of the people of the lands [*i.e.* the heathen (comp. the use of the expression in Ezra ix. 1, 2)].

31. Nevertheless for thy great mercies' sake thou didst not utterly consume them, nor forsake them; for thou art a gracious and merciful God.

32. Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day.

33. Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly:

34. Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers, kept thy law, nor hearkened unto thy commandments and thy testimonies, wherewith thou didst testify against them.

35. For they have not served thee in their kingdom, and in thy great goodness that thou gavest them, and in the large and fat land which thou gavest before them, neither turned they from their wicked works.

36. Behold, we are servants [as we would not be thy servants, we are servants to the king of Persia (comp. Ezra ix. 9)] this day, and for the

land that thou gavest unto our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof, behold, we are servants in it:

37. And it yielded much increase [*i.e.* it pays tribute in money and kind (see Ezra iv. 13, *ante*, p. 166)] unto the kings whom thou hast set over us because of our sins: also they have dominion over our bodies, and over our cattle, at their pleasure, and we are in great distress.

38. And because of all this we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, Levites, and priests, seal unto it. [The exact force of the phrase used is doubtful; but its general sense must be that the classes named took part in the sealing. It was usual in the east to authenticate covenants by appending the seals of those who were parties to them (Jer. xxxii. 10; see also note, *post*, p. 262.)].

REVEALED IN SONG.

THIS wonderful chapter deals with the Fast, the Confession, and the Covenant. After a single day's rest the people came together again with all the tokens of sorrow, even to dust on the head. It would appear that in this instance there was distinct consistency between the outward and the visible sign and the inward and spiritual condition. It is noted in the second verse that "the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers." There is a change from "children" to "seed," and in the relation in which the event occurs that change is profoundly significant. The seed of Israel had sins peculiarly their own to confess, and they showed their wisdom in separating themselves from all strangers, and standing in their uniqueness to make their sorrowful statement.

"Then stood up upon the stairs, of the Levites, Jeshua, and Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani, [also] the Levites, Jeshua, and Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabniah, Sherebiah, Hodijah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah" (vv. 4, 5).

It does us good to read so strange a list of names, showing how great has been human history, and how widely separated men are from one another, in locality, in name, in education, and in everything that makes up distinctive civilisation. Here we are confronted by quite a host of unknown names. Having nothing to judge by but the names, we should instantly pronounce all these persons utter and absolute strangers; we know nothing about them; they might be the names of objects rather than of persons, of rivers or of mountains rather than of living men: but is there not another standard by which to judge than that of

nomenclature? We may be related to this very people by sympathies which have not yet been discovered; we must hear them speak; perhaps in tone we may discover the germ of union, and may be able to overleap the barrier of names, and to join hands together in common worship before the throne of the One Father. How do we really know men? Sometimes we know them by their thoughts: the moment they reveal their mental condition to us, and show us within what scope their mind operates, and upon what objects their best confidence is fixed, we begin to feel towards them all the sensations which belong to truest kinship. There is a family of souls as well as a household of bodies. Herein the great Fatherhood is magnified above all local and personal parentage, for our parents themselves are but the children of others, and all men are the children and heritage of God. For convenience' sake, it is well to have men divided into separate houses, families, tribes, and the like; but all such division should be regarded as a division only, and not as expressing the deeper realities of the divine purpose. That purpose regards all the human family as one, and the earth as one great house in which God has placed his family for the culture, discipline, and perfecting of ideal, alike of character and service. Sometimes we know men by their music: without being able to explain a single word they utter, the air they sing enters our hearts, acts persuasively upon our better nature, and draws us towards them in a spirit of recognition and trustfulness: we say that the utterers of such music must themselves be good; no heart could be the fountain or medium of such strains that had not first been purified by a great baptism from heaven. Sometimes we know men by their religion. To know how truly we shrink from idolatry we must see the rites of idolaters as practised by themselves; then we contrast with all the ritualism of heathenism, the simplicity, the quietness, the tenderness of Christian worship. In a far-away land where everything is strange to us, could we hear any man lift up his voice and say, "Our Father which art in heaven," we should instantly feel united to that man by the deepest and most vital of all bonds. In the light of these explanations it is possible that we may find kinship as between ourselves and the men whose uncouth names are now before us. Do not let us be turned away by those

names, saying, It is impossible that they can be associated with any common thought or worship; rather let us study the song which is sung, and determine whether within its music there is not ground enough on which to find common standing, and pathos enough to bring all the worshippers into a state of common emotion.

"Stand up and bless the Lord your God for ever and ever: and blessed be thy glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise" (v. 5).

Are the men such strangers now as they were? Do they not seem to be standing near us, and cannot their voices and ours be blended into the same strain of hallowed worship? We are not deterred from this union by the nobility of the expression; we feel that the nobility belongs to us as well as to the ancient Jews, because the same God is our God, and we adore him as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nor are we separated from these worshippers by their high rapture. Christian worship, too, has its own sublime enthusiasm. In the utterance of Christian adoration we think of the eternity of God, and his glorious name, and his exaltation above all blessing and praise. A very remarkable expression is found in this verse. The people are exhorted to "bless the Lord," and the reason would appear to be that he "is exalted above all blessing and praise." We must thus read the verse—Bless the Lord, who is above all blessing; praise the God, who is beyond all praise; stretch out your souls towards him, who never can be comprehended in all the fulness of his grace and glory. Thus the finite is called upon to assert itself in lowly worship, because the object before which it bows down is nothing less than the Infinite. Our idea of God, whatever it be, determines the nature and range of our worship. Evidently the Jew had a grand conception of the divine nature, and therefore his song was lofty, solemn, and triumphant. That the Jew had this conception is evident from the sixth verse—

"Thou, even thou, art Lord alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee."

Thus the whole universe comes within the purview of the uplifted eyes of the true worshippers. How word is piled upon

word, and thought upon thought, until all the help of time and space becomes useless, and imagination is left to create for itself all the possibilities of divine essence and royalty and purpose! "The host of heaven worshippeth thee:" the stars glitter forth thy praise, and above the stars are the singing angels who night and day hymn the ineffable praise of God. In joining such a company as this the worshippers must prepare themselves to be meet companions. Earth must bring its noblest tribute when she joins the choir of the skies. Feeble, untrained, and inadequate voices—that is, voices which are purposely so—have no place in grand tribute of song. The leader of the choir determines the quality of all who compose it. In this instance the whole heaven leads the universe, and the universe must therefore rise to the sublimity of the occasion, and pour forth its noblest strains.

From the seventh to the thirty-first verse we find what we have repeatedly found before, namely, a graphic representation of God in history. This paragraph would seem to be a condensation of the Old Testament. He who has this paragraph in hand may be regarded as possessing all the history of the ancient Jews. How they delighted to begin with the election of Abram, and the taking forth of that pilgrim out of Ur of the Chaldees, enlarging his name, and leading him onward towards the land of Canaan! The Jews never forgot the affliction of their fathers in Egypt, or the triumph of Israel over Pharaoh and his hosts. As they looked backward they saw continually the cloudy pillar which made the day solemn, and the pillar of fire which turned the night into the brilliance of day. Never did they forget the grandeur of Sinai, when God spake with their fathers from heaven, and gave them right judgments, true laws, good statutes and commandments. How tenderly the heart of the Jew lingered over the memory of the Sabbath—the sweet breathing time, the sacred rest, which was as a pledge and symbol of heaven! On the one hand, whilst the Jew magnified the goodness of God in his history, he never forgot that his fathers dealt proudly, and hardened their necks, and hearkened not to God's commandments, but remembered that they refused to obey, neither were mindful of God's wonders that he did amongst them; but hardened their hearts, and how they appointed a captain in

their rebellion that they might return to their bondage. As the black cloud gathered around the memory, the Jew himself confessed that judgment would have been mercy in answer to such stupendous guilt; yet the Jew remembered that God was ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and unwilling to forsake his people: he reminded himself that even the molten calf, to which they said, This is the God that brought us out of Egypt, did not wholly turn away the heart of God from his people; even though they fell down before that useless calf, yet God in his manifold mercy forsook them not in the wilderness; the pillar of cloud was still there by day, and the pillar of fire was there to show them light, and the way wherein they should go was made obvious to their eyes. The song rolls on from paragraph to paragraph, each one of which is a historical mount. In one we find the giving of manna and the pouring out of water; then we are reminded of the sustenance for forty years in the wilderness, so that the travellers lacked nothing—"their clothes waxed not old, and their feet swelled not;" then we are told how God gave them kingdoms and nations, and divided them into corners, so that they possessed the land of Sihon, and the land of the king of Heshbon, and the land of Og king of Bashan; and still the history rolls on, until Israel took strong cities, and a fat land, and possessed houses full of all goods, wells digged, vineyards, and oliveyards, and fruit trees in abundance: so they did eat, and were filled, and became fat, and delighted themselves in God's great goodness.

The song might well have ended here; but truth compelled an extension of the music until it included the shame as well as the the glory—

"Nevertheless they were disobedient, and rebelled against thee, and cast thy law behind their backs, and slew thy prophets which testified against them to turn them to thee, and they wrought great provocations" (v. 26).

Then God did not cut them off, though he delivered them into the hand of their enemies, who vexed them. In the time of their trouble Israel cried unto God, and he heard them from heaven, and according to his manifold mercies he give them saviours, who saved them out of the hand of their enemies. Then again they turned to their evil, after having recruited themselves with

the rest which God so graciously gave—they rested them from evil that they might return to it with redoubled energy. For a time they were left in the hand of their enemies, who had dominion over them; yet again they returned and cried unto God, and he heard them from heaven, yea, many times did he deliver them according to his mercy; many years did God forbear them, and testified against his people by his Spirit in his prophets; yet they would not give ear. Verily, they came near to destruction, they were upon the very brink of hell; yet in this extremity we come upon the "nevertheless," which forms such a prominent word in the evolution of divine providence:—

"Nevertheless for thy great mercies' sake thou didst not utterly consume them, nor forsake them: for thou art a gracious and merciful God" (v. 31).

Is nothing to be learned from this summary of the history of Israel? The thing to be learned is that we are to endeavour to take a comprehensive view of all the dealings and purposes of God. As history grows an opportunity for the profoundest study of God presents itself. At first there is but little to see and little to think about; day by day proceeds, and God's writing becomes more conspicuous; year is added to year, and a few pages are filled with sacred writing; century is added to century, and then that which was mysterious enters into the region of revelation and shines with brightest glory. Never let a man forget even his own little personal history. Day by day, when he is cast down or conscious of exhaustion, let him begin at the time when he was in the cradle, and follow all the line of divine providence in his own life; let him set things which belong to one another together, and see what shaping and directing there has been in all the mystery of being. In this respect every man should become his own bible; his own assurance of the divine existence, his own proof of providence, his own fountain of evidence. It is well that men should, so far as their mental capacity will allow, have grand conceptions of universal history, but it is absolutely essential to save the soul not only from difficulty but from blank despair, that every man should vividly recollect the days of his own life, and remember how God has lifted him up, preserved him, enriched him, and made the wilderness of earth blossom as with the flowers of heaven. Every man loses standing-ground when

his recollection of personal history becomes blurred and dim. It is not every one who can discuss great philosophical questions of history, but surely every man can trace his own life, and see in it a daily miracle of grace and love.

The singers having sung this song of history they turn in upon themselves and make a solemn personal application of all the truth which they have reviewed in music:—

"Now therefore our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day. Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly: neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers, kept thy law, nor hearkened unto thy commandments and thy testimonies, wherewith thou didst testify against them" (vv. 32–34).

So the people confess the general collapse of the nation, and they acknowledge their own iniquities individually. The great purpose of historical review is to fix an exhortation upon our own souls, and to visit our own souls with all the stimulus o memory, of self-reproach, of ill-requited goodness, so that the times past may more than suffice. They confessed that kings were set over them because of their own sins. We suffer for our actual transgressions: we not only suffer for the sins of past ages. We cannot so detach ourselves from the currents of history as to escape the consequences of other people's sin, though that sin were committed ten thousand ages ago. The world is one, history is one, God is one. In this sense we belong to one another: no man liveth unto himself, no man sinneth unto himself, no man can say that he is injuring himself alone. He who commits any one sin injures the whole human race. It is often supposed that we ought not to suffer on account of the sins of others, but apart altogether from biblical doctrine we find in history itself that sin, done by whomsoever, carries with it consequences to the third and fourth generation. No man can drink away his senses, or steep himself in sensuality, or give the bridle to his lusts and passions, and yet save his posterity from evil consequences. Though the law may seem to operate unfairly in this one direction, yet the law of the Lord is equal: no man

can attend to the laws of health, be wise, true, prudent, and wholly good, without his children reaping great advantage from such discipline and culture.

Now the people enter into the covenant—

"And because of all this we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, Levites, and priests, seal unto it" (v. 38).

Each party impressed his seal on moist clay, which was then hardened. We are told that these seals were sometimes attached to the document by separate strings. It is not enough to make a general covenant; the covenant must be single and individual, each man regarding it as if he were severally responsible for it. Verily this is a joint and several note presented to God by humbled and penitent souls. It is nobly signed if we look at the infinite number of the signatures, and it is pathetically signed if we look at the signatures one by one, each soul saying—I have sinned, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: I have lost my inheritance: God be merciful to me a sinner! There is great utility in solemn vows and covenants; they have a tonic effect upon the soul. Who could look over all the covenants and vows which he has written down as promised to heaven, and yet remain unmoved by the melancholy writing? In looking back upon such declarations of sin, such vows and confessions of penitence and broken-heartedness, men may read their spiritual history, written as with a pen of light. Take down the book, and turn over its pages one by one, and listen to the soul as it muses upon the autobiography:—Here I must have sinned some black sin, blacker probably than any other I ever committed, for see how deep is the river of my tears, hear how loud and bitter is the moan of my penitence;—there I must have been awakened suddenly to a gracious sense of God's goodness, for see how I write of daily mercy and daily comfort, and give myself away to heaven's service with all the passion of grateful love: that must have been a lustrous day in my spiritual history,—I must have seen heaven itself opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God;—see here again my soul accuses itself of penuriousness, niggardliness, love of the world, a diligent pursuit of useless things, and at the end it says with the preacher, "all

is vanity";—and here again I become a better man, vowing that my soul shall no more go astray; this vow I will now repeat; I have learned this lesson, however, that a vow uttered in my own name, and determined upon in my own strength, shall be but as the morning cloud—it shall pass away and leave no impress behind; I must register my vows at the Cross,—I must seal them with the signet of Calvary,—I must write them as with the blood of Christ; I will now vow that, if thou wilt be gracious unto me, and forgive me, and mightily redeem me from the perdition of the past, I will live unto thee, lovingly, self-sacrificingly, in the very spirit of him who died that I might live.

We cannot leave this chapter without being struck with the slowness yet the certainty of spiritual education. Again and again it would seem as if Israel had wholly fallen back from the point which it had attained in upward progress. The beginning would seem to have been better than the end, for of Abraham it is said, "Thou foundest his heart faithful before thee." Can a higher compliment be paid to human nature than that it shall be accounted faithful before God? Then the people praise the Lord; and no sooner does the song cease than the sin begins. Around the base of Sinai the people tremble, and vow that they will be reverent evermore; yet even there they turn their hearts towards idolatry and forget the living God. They cry unto heaven in their hunger, and whilst the manna is in their mouths they blaspheme the giver. Is there any progress being made in true goodness? Truly it is slow; at the same time we cannot but regard it as certain. All growth is imperceptible There are times of recession when we think that all the water of the sea has gone away from the shore, yet presently we find that the refluence has only been in order that the next rush of the tide might come farther upon the golden strand. God measures things by a standard of his own; he who dwelleth in eternity takes no heed of the little hours and weary days and nights of time. Many years did God forbear his people, and yet the years were as nothing to him, because he saw in that very forbearance a necessary instrument and medium of spiritual education. God hears in our last prayer more than he heard in the first; the words may be the same throughout, but the tone

is different, the pathos is deeper, the voice of the suppliant is charged with deeper significance. All this may be hidden to ourselves, but, blessed be God! it is all known to him who searcheth the heart and trieth the reins. Little by little we grow before him. It would appear as if it were worth God's while to wait ten thousand years for the human race to learn another syllable of his name. We count the time long, because we ourselves are mortal: God sits in the sanctuary of the everlasting and he looks upon all things from an elevation which reduces our standards, measurements, times, and distances to insignificance. He would not keep the universe where it is, and as it is, if he did not know that progress was being made. From the beginning he foresaw the end. Everything is passing exactly at the rate which he foreknew. Have pity upon us, thou Mighty One, when we are impatient, restless, fretful, and resentful. We cannot help it. This is the proof of our weakness, the very seal of our humiliation. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Son of God, it is thy right to reign—take thy right, and rule all the ages of time and all the lands of earth!

Chapter x.

[In verses 1–28 are contained the names of them that sealed the covenant. *]

28. ¶ And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the porters, the singers, the Nethinims, and all they that have separated themselves [see ch. ix. 2] from the people of the lands unto the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, every one having knowledge, and having understanding;

29. They clave to their brethren, their nobles [*i.e.*, to their (more) distinguished brethren, those who had set their seals to the covenant], and entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and his judgments and his statutes;

30. And that we would not give our daughters unto the people of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons:

31. And if the people of the land bring ware or any victuals on the sabbath day [comp. ch. xiii. 16, where this desecration of the sabbath is shown to have commonly taken place] to sell, that we would not buy it of them on the sabbath, or on the holy day: and that we would leave the

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* The importance attached to seals in the East is so great that without one no document is regarded as authentic. The use of some method of sealing is obviously, therefore, of remote antiquity. Among such methods used in Egypt at a very early period were engraved stones, pierced through their length and hung by a string or chain from the arm or neck, or set in rings for the finger. The most ancient form used for this purpose was the scarabaeus, formed of precious or common stone, or even of blue pottery or porcelain, on the flat side of which the inscription or device was engraved. Cylinders of stone or pottery bearing devices were also used as signets. One in the Alnwick Museum bears the date of Osirtasen I., or between 2000 and 3000 B.C. Besides finger-rings, the Egyptians, and also the Assyrians and Babylonians, made use of cylinders of precious stone or terra-cotta, which were probably set in a frame and rolled over the document which was to be sealed. The document, especially among the two latter nations, was itself often made of baked clay, sealed while it was wet and burnt afterwards. But in many cases the seal consisted of a lump of clay, impressed with the seal and attached to the document, whether of papyrus or other material, by strings. These clay lumps often bear the impress of the finger, and also the remains of the strings by which they had been fastened. One such found at Nimroud was the seal of Sabaco king of Egypt, B.C. 711, and another is believed by Mr. Layard to have been the seal of Sennacherib, of

seventh year, and the exaction of every debt [*i.e.* "Let the land rest in the sabbatical year," as commanded in Exod. xxiii. 11; Lev. xxv. 4].

32. Also we made ordinances for us, to charge ourselves yearly with the third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God. [*The Speaker's Commentary* says: This appears to have been the first occasion in which an annual payment towards the maintenance of the Temple service and fabric was established. The half-shekel of the law (Exod. xxx. 13) was paid only at the time of a census (which rarely took place), and was thus not a recurring tax. In after times the annual payment was raised from the third of a shekel to half a shekel (see Matt. xvii. 24)].

33. For the shewbread, and for the continual meat offering, and for the continual burnt offering, of the sabbaths, of the new moons, for the set feasts, and for the holy things, and for the sin offerings to make an atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God.

34. And we cast the lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for the wood offering, to bring it into the house of our God, after the houses of our fathers, at times appointed year by year, to burn upon the altar of the Lord our God, as it is written in the law [the allusion is probably to Lev. vi. 12];

35. And to bring the firstfruits of our ground, and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, unto the house of the Lord:

36. Also the firstborn of our sons [*i.e.* the redemption money for them (Numb. xviii. 15, 16)], and of our cattle [*i.e.* of our unclean beasts. These also were to be redeemed (Numb. xviii. 15). The firstlings of the clean beasts were to be sacrificed (*ib.* 17)], as it is written in the law, and the firstlings of our herds and of our flocks, to bring to the house of our God, unto the priests that minister in the house of our God:

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nearly the same date. In a somewhat similar manner, doors of tombs or other places intended to be closed were sealed with lumps of clay. The use of clay in sealing is noticed in the Book of Job xxxviii. 14, and the signet-ring as an ordinary part of a man's equipment in the case of Judah (Gen. xxxviii. 18), who probably, like many modern Arabs, wore it suspended by a string from his neck or arm. The ring or the seal as an emblem of authority both in Egypt, in Persia, and elsewhere, is mentioned in the cases of Pharaoh with Joseph, Gen. xli. 42; of Ahab, 1 Kings xxi. 8; of Ahasuerus, Esth. iii. 10, 12, viii. 2; and as an evidence of a covenant in Jer. xxxii. 10, 54; Neh. ix. 38, x. 1; Hag. ii. 23. Its general importance is denoted by the metaphorical use of the word, Rev. v. 1, ix. 4.

Among modern Orientals the size and place of the seal vary according to the importance both of the sender of a letter and of the person to whom it is sent. In sealing, the seal itself, not the paper, is smeared with the sealing-substance. Thus illiterate persons sometimes use the object nearest at hand—their own finger, or a stick notched for the purpose—and, daubing it with ink, smear the paper therewith. Engraved signets were in use among the Hebrews in early times, as is evident in the description of the high-priest's breastplate, Exod. xxviii. 11, 36, xxxix. 6, and the work of the engraver as a distinct occupation is mentioned in Ecclus. xxxviii. 27.—SMITH'S *Dictionary of the Bible.*

37. And that we should bring the firstfruits of our dough [see Numb. xv. 20], and our offerings, and the fruit of all manner of trees, of wine and of oil, unto the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God; and the tithes of our ground unto the Levites, that the same Levites might have the tithes in all the cities of our tillage.

38. And the priest the son of Aaron shall be with the Levites, when the Levites take tithes: and the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes [which was the priests' due (see Numb. xviii. 26–28)] unto the house of our God, to the chambers, into the treasure house.

39. For the children of Israel and the children of Levi shall bring the offering of the corn, of the new wine, and the oil, unto the chambers, where are the vessels of the sanctuary, and the priests that minister, and the porters, and the singers: and we will not forsake the house of our God [both the pledge and the violation of it in the sequel are explained by chap. xiii. 11–14].

Chapter xi.

There is a close connection between this chapter and the opening portion of chap. vii. The thought of the writer, or compiler, goes back to what was said in chap. vii. 4 of the scant population of Jerusalem, and he proceeds to tell us how the deficiency was remedied.

Chapter xii.

[This chapter is made up of two portions. From verse 1 to verse 26 it mainly consists of lists of the leading priests and Levites at different periods. At verse 27 Nehemiah commences to give an account of the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem. It seems strange (*Speaker's Commentary*) that the wall should not have been dedicated immediately after its completion. But the *nexus* of the remainder of this chapter with the next, and the date given in chap. xiii. 6, make it certain that the ceremony was deferred for the space of nearly twelve years. Perhaps Nehemiah required an express permission from the Persian king before he could venture on a solemnity which might have been liable to misrepresentation.]

27. ¶ And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites out of all their places [*i.e.* out of the various cities of Judah and Benjamin in which they dwelt (see chap. xi. 36)], to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singing with cymbals, psalteries, and with harps.

28. And the sons of the singers gathered themselves together, both out of the plain country round about Jerusalem and from the villages of Netophathi [*rather*, the villages of the Netophathites, as the same phrase is rendered in 1 Chron. ix. 16];

29. Also from the house of Gilgal, and out of the fields of Geba and Azmaveth: for the singers had builded them villages round about Jerusalem.

30. And the priests and the Levites purified themselves [comp. 2 Chron. xxix. 15; Ezra vi. 20], and purified the people, and the gates, and the wall.

31. Then I brought up [the first person is here resumed, which has been laid aside since chap. vii. 5, and is now continued to the end of the Book] the princes of Judah upon the wall, and appointed two great companies of them that gave thanks, whereof one went on the right hand upon the wall toward the dung gate [see chap. ii. 13].

32. And after them went Hoshaiah [perhaps the "Hoshea" of chap. x. 23], and half of the princes of Judah,

33. And Azariah, Ezra, and Meshullam,

34. Judah, and Benjamin, and Shemaiah, and Jeremiah,

35. And certain of the priests' sons with trumpets; namely, Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Michaiah, the son of Zaccur, and the son of Asaph:

36. And his brethren, Shemaiah, and Azarael, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethaneel, and Judah, Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God, and Ezra the scribe before them.

37. And at the fountain gate [see chap. iii. 15], which was over against them, they went up by the stairs of the city of David, at the going up of the wall, above the house of David even unto the water gate [cf. chap. iii. 26] eastward.

38. And the other company of them that gave thanks went over against them, and I after them, and the half of the people upon the wall, from beyond the tower of the furnaces even unto the broad wall;

39. And from above the gate of Ephraim, and above the old gate, and above the fish gate, and the tower of Hananeel, and the tower of Meah, even unto the sheep gate: and they stood still in the prison gate.

40. So stood the two companies of them that gave thanks in [*rather*, by] the house of God, and I, and the half of the rulers [comp. ver. 32] with me:

41. And the priests; Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Michaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets;

42. And Maaseiah, and Shemaiah, and Eleazar, and Uzzi, and Jehohanan, and Malchijah, and Elam, and Ezer. And the singers sang loud, with Jezrahiah their overseer.

43. Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced: for God had made them rejoice with great joy: the wives also and the children rejoiced: so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off.

44. ¶ And at that time were some appointed over the chambers for the treasures, for the offerings [*i.e.* the free-will offerings] for the firstfruits, and for the tithes, to gather into them out of the fields of the cities the portions of the law for the priests and Levites: for Judah rejoiced [Judah's satisfaction with the priests and the Levites took the shape of increased offerings, more ample tithes, and the like, whence the appointment of treasuries and treasurers became necessary] for the priests and for the Levites that waited [that served in the Temple].

45. And both the singers and the porters kept the ward of their God, and the ward of the purification [the observances with respect to purification (see 1 Chron. xxiii. 28)], according to the commandment of David, and of Solomon his son.

46. For in the days of David and Asaph of old there were chief of the singers, and songs of praise [*rather*, chiefs of the singers and of the songs of praise] and thanksgiving unto God.

47. And all Israel in the days of Zerrubbabel, and in the days of Nehemiah [*The Speaker's Commentary* says: The intention is to compare the religious activity and strictness of Nehemiah's time with that which had prevailed under Zerrubbabel, as described by Ezra (vi. 16, 22). It is implied that the intermediate period had been a time of laxity], gave the portions of the singers and the porters, every day his portion: and they sanctified holy things [*i.e.*, the people paid their tithes regularly to the Levites, and the Levites paid the tithe of the tithes to the priests (comp. ch. x. 37, 38)] unto the Levites; and the Levites sanctified them unto the children of Aaron.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, we desire that thou wouldest evermore reign over us, for we have reigned over ourselves, and lo, we are before thee as men who confess their sins. We have usurped the prerogative of God, and we suffer by reason of our blasphemy. Thou hast made us, and not we ourselves: do thou therefore rule over us altogether, and may thy kingdom come into our hearts! If we had hearkened unto thee, thou wouldst soon have subdued our enemies before us, and chased the alien away. We were our own lords and kings, we looked not unto the Lord of lords; therefore didst thou cause us to suffer much, to be bitterly disappointed, and to be grieved with great pain. We bless thee, if the disappointment of the Lord has brought us to contrition; we thank thee that, having suffered under thy just law, we now cry out with our whole heart for the exercise of thy saving mercy. Undertake for us, we humbly beseech thee, O God: let our whole life be thy care; lead us out of ourselves. Thou canst turn the curse into a blessing, and the blessing that is unworthy thou canst also turn into a curse. We put ourselves into thy keeping, to be led where thou dost please, to be settled here or there, to have unrest or pain, content or enjoyment, defeat or victory, as the Lord will. Let thy will be done in earth, as it is done in heaven. Let there be no rivalry with thee in our hearts; let thy kingdom within us be complete. We meet at the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, where all hearts are one, where all sins may be forgiven, where men may see heaven opened, and the great purpose of God realised. Help us to look steadily unto Jesus, to fix our undivided vision on the slain Lamb. Create within us a great expectation concerning his power, and may all our expectancy be more than satisfied! We would that this should be a memorable time in our history, for the opening of our hearts towards God, for the quick and bitter remembrance of sin, for great liberty of speech in the confession and owning of our guilt. Help us to see ourselves as thou dost see us, to see the enormity of sin, to feel it to be the abominable thing which God hates, and then show us all the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and say unto us by thy Holy Spirit, Where sin abounds grace shall much more abound. Then the terror which comes out of our sin shall be lost and swallowed up utterly in the joy that comes out of thy salvation. We pray for others as we would pray for ourselves: for the sick, that they may be comforted, chastened, and perfected in saintly trust; for the poor, that they may be saved from hopelessness and from distrust in thy goodness; for the young, that they may be pure, brave, unselfish, and wise; for the prodigal, that he may soon return; and for all thy Church throughout the world. Hear us, Lord, and give us now some new token of thy love. Amen.

Chapter xiii.

"Howbeit our God turned the curse into a blessing" (v. 2.)

CURSES AND BLESSINGS.

PICTURE a very large concourse of people with Nehemiah at their head. They have assembled to read the law written in Moses. This was the habit of the ancients: when they were in trouble, when they were at their wits' end, they found it a high intellectual and spiritual tonic to read the law. We should find it to be exactly the same under events which we cannot control, and under sorrows for which we have no healing. If under such circumstances we bring ourselves face to face and heart to heart with the Eternal Word and the unchanging testimony, our health will be renewed and our hope will be rekindled.

Whilst the people were reading the law written in Moses they came upon a very singular and animating passage. Such passages abound in all the providential working of God and the true histories thereof; but sometimes a passage strikes us with peculiar accent and vividness, though we may have read it many times before without having been deeply impressed by its gravity and its application to ourselves. The passage in question ran to this effect: that the Ammonite and the Moabite should never enter the congregation of God for ever, because they met not the children of Israel with bread and water in the time of their necessity, but hired against the children of Israel the prophet Balaam to curse the children of Israel: "howbeit our God turned the curse [of Balaam] into a blessing." Observe the marvellous constancy of the divine arbitrament and justice. Why was the Ammonite and why was the Moabite excluded from the congregation of God? For the very selfsame reason that men will be excluded from the kingdom of heaven in the last great assize. "Depart from me, Ammonite and Moabite; for I was an hungered, and ye gave me no bread; I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink." What he said to the Ammonite and the Moabite he will say to the goats upon his left hand when he comes to judge the world. It is one government, it is one law, it is one God;

touch it where we may, we have the same response. Hence the beauty, the grandeur, the immortal majesty of the exclamation, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord." Our purpose is to show that God has the power to turn a curse into a blessing, and that this doctrine is the ultimate rest and the supreme comfort of every honest man.

"Our God turned the curse into a blessing." The ancient believers always seemed to have God so near that they had no difficulty in getting through the thicket which lures us—the thicket of secondary causes, intermediate agencies, tumultuous and confusing events in life. The Jews, in their better time and in their better estate, seemed to go right up to God as friend might go to friend, and openly confer with him. Nehemiah does not say that Balaam was met by another Balaam: that some man had more genius than the prophet that was hired: that Balaam was outwitted by a keener sagacity than his own: that Balaam was checkmated by a subtler policy than he had imagination enough to conceive. Nehemiah sees God at work, sees the finger of God in this transformation, and openly, gladly, gratefully acknowledges that the transformation of the curse was not the work of human goodwill or of human genius, but a direct operation of the divine almightiness itself. We lose so much by not seeing God immediately. We have left him so far behind. he now stands far off from our consciousness: whereas the old men who laid the rocky foundation of human history, and won its early victories, were men who had simply to look up when they saw the Almighty: to turn round, and they beheld the gleaming of his countenance: to put out the hand and they touched the hem of his garment. Why do we allow God to go so far away from our consciousness and appreciation and love? Why do we not cry out for him, and bid him come to us, and give him no rest until he draws near? This is the true religion; this is the noble piety; this is the infinite privilege of the sons of God. It will be comforting to not a few if we reflect for a moment upon this great truth, that whatever curses are breathed upon our life by hired prophets, or by false priests and by traitorous friends, may be turned into blessings by the great and good hand of God.

Let me remind you of a few familiar principles upon which we are all agreed, and then illustrate how these principles, that seem to have no centre, but to be floating as vague generalities, gather themselves up in a central principle in the divine government, and are not loose and incoherent propositions, but really part of the sum total of the kingdom and government of God.

To be cursed of man is really no proof of God's disapprobation. Let us consider the case well, especially such as are labouring under harsh criticism, and exposed to unfriendly judgment: men who are misapprehended and misrepresented: men who have to suffer more or less of social excommunication and class ostracism; let us look carefully at the proposition—to be cursed of man is really no proof of God's disapprobation. Christ said, "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." Paul says, "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth." Who is man? What right has he to curse? What does any one man know about any other man, even his most familiar friend? We say, "Who can find out the Almighty unto perfection?" Who can find out any man to perfection? We have screens behind which we veil ourselves from the most loving and peering eyes; we can retire into solitudes and silences impregnable; we can be ourselves and by ourselves in an awful loneliness no friend can violate. Who can tell all the mysteries of our temperament and of our constitution, of the subtle circumstances that have made us what we are? Who can go back into our early history and trace us up day by day, and see the marvellous chemistry that has been going on, alike physiologically and socially and publicly, making up elements and composition for which there seem to be no words? And unless a man can estimate us critically and exhaustively, his judgment must be marred by the limitation of his knowledge.

He ought to be a very great man and a very pure, lofty, and godly soul who undertakes to curse anybody else. In cursing others we may be but showing our own littleness, and playing

such fantastic tricks before high heaven as make the angels weep. Why should we be cruel, sharp, and harsh with each other? Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. A curse should only come from holy lips. A malediction coming from unconsecrated lips hurts him who speaks, not him who hears. There is great need for this lesson in the church to-day, for there is a kind of pharisaic morality which is very prone to speak that which is very intolerable, and which seems to imagine it increases its own virtue by indicating very broadly and vividly the vices of other people. There are persons who have a keen eye for faults and a sharp tongue for harsh criticism, who can always tell who is not sound and who is not full weight, and who is not precisely perpendicular, and although these people would disavow the power of cursing, they practically avail themselves of the prerogative of malediction and excommunication. If men would speak only according to their holiness, we should hear but little of them; if they would let their own purity and honour be the measure of their criticism upon their fellow-citizens, we should have silence where now we have speech, and humiliation where now we have self-exalting. Let us understand, therefore, that though scourged by whips of unworthy men, borne down by injustice and unnecessary criticism,—to be cursed of men is not necessarily a proof of God's disapprobation. He may be unwise or unworthy who takes our name in vain—unworthy to set his feet in the dust we left behind on the highway, who ventures to say harsh words of us. Let our reply be a nobler bearing, tenderer love to God, profounder and deeper homage to all the law and requirement of the Holy One: answering not by vain words and by self-vindication as hollow as the curse it repays, but by growing massiveness of character, by higher dignity of spirit, by loftier aspiration, and by a more consecrated and honourable service in the kingdom of God.

It follows, however, that to be blest of man is no proof of God's favour. There are those who receive an applause which has no fame in it—men who are loudly called for, and whose names are received with echoing thunders of acclamation, who know that they do not deserve the cordiality with which they are hailed. And the real cursing is that which the man breathes upon

himself. When he rises amid all this applause and welcoming, and says to himself, "You painted hypocrite, you know that you do not deserve these encomiums and approbations," then it is a hollow thunder that resounds around him. He is not touched by the applause—he declines it; for there is honesty in that thief, there is honour in that conscience. He receives it outwardly, and bows his grateful returns; but he declines it in his soul, for he knows that he has no right, title, lot, or memorial in any community of honest men.

To what blessing are we trusting? It is in vain to trust to any blessing that can be turned into a curse. Let us see to it that it is an essential blessing we get hold of—a vital, divine benediction. If it be a secondary benediction it can be reversed; if it be a decree from an inferior court, it may be annulled by an appeal to some higher assize. To what blessing are we trusting? To the blessing of those who know little about us, to the kind word of men who do not understand us, to the confidence and the honour of people who would despise us and throw us into the river of forgetfulness if they knew what we were. There can be no virtue in such benediction. Let us renounce the artificial solace, and know that a blessing, a favour, an approbation that is not sanctioned by conscience, endorsed and approved of God, must in the long run become a sting and fill us with intolerable remorse. And remember, as the complement of this truth, that it is unwise and irreligious to fear any curse which can be turned into a blessing. "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God." "Oh that my people had hearkened unto me, and Israel had walked in my ways! I should soon have subdued their enemies, and turned my hand against their adversaries." God's blessing is the only abiding approbation: any blessing short of the divine blessing is not worth having. Let God undertake for us; then it shall be true that if a man please the Lord he makes his enemies to be at peace with him. It shall be true of us that no weapon formed against us shall prosper. It shall be true of us in our degree, as of David's and of Christ's—his enemies will I clothe with shame: but upon himself shall his crown flourish.

Why should we fear the malediction of men? Why should we court the approbation of a corrupt society? If we do anything unworthy for the purpose of bringing upon ourselves compliments and courtesies and benedictions which are hollow in themselves, and which come from unworthy sources, we are bribing society to dishonour ourselves.

How much needs to be spoken upon this point to those who are called to bear testimony for Christ! Ministers need to speak to themselves very clearly upon this, for the temptation is to fear the face and to dread the curse of men. When they stand in the pulpit to speak some unpopular truth, or to assail what they believe to be a great public iniquity, there is a spirit looking at them and saying: "Take care—perhaps you may offend some persons; perhaps they may leave your ministry; perhaps they may desert your pews. Do not put the thing so broadly, vividly, or graphically, but throw clouds around it and speak in ambiguous terms, lest you be considered to be too personal and too much to the point." O, cursed spirit! bringing with it not breath from heaven, but blasts from hell! Oh that Christian men may be lifted above all fear, have the courage of their convictions, and be clothed with the spirit which says it is unwise, it is irreligious, it is atheistic, to fear any curse that God has power enough to transform into a blessing!

How far have these general truths been illustrated and confirmed in our personal experience? Every man will have his tale upon this point; every narrative will go to show that these general principles have received individual corroboration. Thus, you have as a younger man been neglected by a certain section of society; you wished to connect yourself with this fellowship, or with that club or association; you wanted to be one of its members, and to enjoy its privileges and its delights; and people conspired against you, and said, "We will not have him amongst us." And at that time you said, "They have cursed me, and their curse is hard to bear." How did you deport yourself? You acted wisely and said, "Then I will turn to the Eternal—I will make friends with God." And in carrying out this high purpose you gave yourself to reading, to study, to

education. You said, "I will seek intellectual expansion—mental refinement; I will acquire riches of the mind; I will attend to self-culture." And so you read the old prophets biblical, and the old teachers classical, and the new historians modern, and you acquainted yourself with manifold wisdom; whereas if you had got the blessing you sought for in the first instance, you would have frittered away your time—you would have been known at best as a brilliant gossip, and you would have gone out of the world without its having been the better for your coming into it. God turned the curse into a blessing; you never would have been the man you are if those people whose delightful society, as you then thought it to be, had not refused your fellowship and confidence. That, at the time a curse, was the making of you. In after years thou shalt say, "It was the best thing that ever happened to me was yonder malediction. I felt it at the time; it struck me heavily, I nearly succumbed—howbeit my God turned the curse into a blessing." Only you be true to God—hand up the human curse to him—let him treat it. "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord;" therefore "avenge not yourselves."

All these thinkings and comfortings would be loose and uncertain if they did not lead up to a far greater principle than any we have yet stated, namely this: God means to turn his own curses into blessings. He does not mean any one of his curses pronounced upon the children of men within the region of the mediatorial and merciful to be his last word. He means his curse to be the beginning of a blessing, the darkness on which he will set his stars. His benediction is his last word, not his curse. When the end shall come—the great dread tragical end shall come—then his last word may be, "Depart from me;" but he will keep the heavens alive for thousands of ages yet, if he can but spare himself the utterance of that word upon any child he ever made. He does not want to say it; the word that he loves best and says most sweetly is, "Come." There is hospitality in it; there is redemption in it; there is immortality in it—in it there is heaven. Look at the curses of God, and you will find exactly what we mean. Once he cursed the ground for man's sake. Not only because man had sinned, but because

by the cursing, and all that was involved in the malediction, he intended man to develop himself in all his powers, energies, and capacities, and fit himself for a destiny superior to any issue possible within the region of earth and time.

Men have been straining themselves, looking off to horizons, to illimitable distances, seeking shadows among the clouds; whereas the Redeemer was standing there within their own shadow length. He was amongst them, and they knew him not. Why all the searching for the mineral and the vegetable that shall heal? For man's sake. If we had not such trouble to go through we should soon die of monotony; but God says, "Try here." He retires, and says, "Perhaps, if you try there. . . ." And so he lures us, challenges our intellectual activity, draws us onward from one discovery to another, until the time shall come when he will say: "Now you shall be masters. I call you no more servants, but friends. You shall find what you want under your feet, and in the very first plant that blooms." In the meantime it is good for us that the things should be hidden, that medical treatment should be a science, that great discoveries should be made, and great intellectual activity should be called for.

What is true in one particular is true in every other. Do you imagine that theology is the thorny maze, the difficult labyrinth, the horrible and entangling thicket which we make of it oftentimes and describe it to be in our laborious books? Nothing of the sort. The simplest of sciences, the easiest of truths, as we have to receive it now, the very alphabet of information and of wisdom; but it is good for us, if we use the opportunity aright, that we should have all this mental collision, this intellectual friction, this exchange of truth and of views, if only we keep our spirit sober; our spirit charitable, noble, catholic, always willing to give as well as to take. Then all this theological inquiry will lead to good and to happy results. But God means all this curse (so-called) of labour, toil, difficulty, intellectual oppositions and collisions, to end in a great blessing, in the discovery of infinite inheritances, and in the enjoyment of immeasurable, yea, infinite largesses of his grace and light. And so in what are

called cross-providences, the Christian testimony should be, "God has always been right. I have said, 'Father, I want this,' and he has been silent; and I have said, 'I will have it!' I have taken it, and it has stung me. I have said, 'I will not go down this road; it looks dark and perilous, and there may be beasts of prey down there; birds of evil omen may be darkening the black shadows of the treacherous trees;' and God has said, 'Go down!' I have said, 'Spare me this!' but he has repeated, 'Go!' and I have in his strength gone down, and all the darkness was passed through in a few yards, and after that came a road thronged with angels, coloured with heaven, bright with all that makes heaven lustrous. God in my poor life has always been right, and when I have been crossed and punished and disappointed and chided and kept back, and when I have felt his hand upon me, and he has driven me down as if I had been his enemy, behold he has been seeking my welfare, turning me aside from dangerous paths; and I am a living man to bear this witness, that out of every disappointment I have received consolation, out of every sacrifice of my own will I have had revelations of the divine approbation and care which have widened and brightened and redeemed and cheered my life."

God has no wish to curse the creatures of his hand. Judgment is his strange work. Truly he can curse, and when he curses who can bless? He can make the harvest a heap, and send upon the earth a day of desperate sorrow. He can bow down the high ones of stature, and humble the haughty. He can make the trees of the forest so few that a child can write them; but this he will not do if we do not sin against him and against ourselves. It is hopeless for us to fight against God, for his will shall stand above the wreck and the humiliation of all human purpose. Babylon cannot establish herself on ground he has forbidden. The wild beasts of the glen shall lie there, and the houses of the proud shall be full of doleful creatures. He will break the staff of the wicked, and throw the spear of their joy into the sea. Yet if we will return unto the Lord he says he will heal us; if we will acquaint ourselves with him we shall be at peace. Yes, blessed be God! where the curse abounds the blessing shall abound still more.

The time will come when all curse shall be done away, when sin shall have played out its little mischief, and the great universe may be the better for the tragedy of Eden. It is possible that there may be more joy over one sinner that repenteth than over ninety-and-nine just persons who need no repentance. How this is to be we cannot tell, but the Cross shall be more beautiful than all other trees, and Calvary shall be more thickly planted than Lebanon. God will turn the curse somehow into blessing, and roses shall be gathered out of the sands of the desert. This is our faith. We do not believe that human power can go beyond a very little length. Man likes to curse because he likes to show his own virtue; he thinks that in cursing others he is showing his own worthiness to be blessed. Let us abstain from cursing; let us trust in the living God, who alone has benedictions to give unto men.

But do not understand that a blessing will be given without any action on your part. "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found. . . . Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him: and to our God, for he will multiply to pardon"—roll in upon him the billows of his forgiveness as wave pursuing wave, until the track of his sin shall be obliterated, and he shall have no more memory of his guilt. Art thou suffering? Go to thy knees; tell God thy sin—tell it all right out; bitter, black, grim, ghastly, though it be; keep back no part of the price; and when thou hast told it all, and left no dreg in thy corrupt heart—when thou hast laid it all clear out before him, then the film shall be taken from thine eyes, thou shalt see the great mighty redeeming cross of Christ, and he shall say, "Thy sins, which are many, are all forgiven thee." The curse will be turned into a blessing, and thou shalt be the better for the abasement and the humiliation, and even for the sin of which thou hast fully confessed thyself, and which has been cleansed out of thee by the atoning blood of the Son of God.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, do thou fill us with a godly concern respecting the state of man. May we look on all things from the altar of the sanctuary, and judge righteous judgment, and be so inspired as to be fearless in the presence of evil. May the questions we ask come out of the heart, burn like fire, and stand up in the presence of men as symbols of the judgment of God. We thank thee for all earnest souls that burn their way through the ages, whose ardour is recognised as that which is kindled from on high: we bless thee for men who dare look at evil and name it by its right name, and curse it at the altar of eternal righteousness; they suffer, but are strong; they are killed, yet they live; they are thy servants, yet they come to us as angels from God. Behold us, we beseech thee, and create in us a spirit of earnest desire to rectify that which is wrong, to find that which is gone astray and restore it; and may our whole soul be filled with the compassion which moved the heart of Christ. We rejoice to find in him our Master and our Lord. He has a right to our whole homage, to all the energy of every faculty, for he died the just for the unjust that he might bring us to God. We hear his solemn words, we listen to the fall of his judgments upon scribes and Pharisees, and pretenders, and hypocrites, and whited sepulchres; and we say, Never man spake like this Man, either in judgment or in tenderness, in the spirit of righteousness or in the spirit of redemption. May we listen to all the tones of his voice, and respond to them according to our necessity; especially may we respond to the Son of God when he offers to give us pardon, and purity, and rest, and hope of heaven: then may we run towards him with eagerness and delight, knowing that he hath proceeded forth from God that so he might deliver and enrich human kind. If we pray for men of various estate, passing through various difficulties, afflictions, and emotions, surely thou wilt hear our prayer, made strong and prevalent in the name of Jesus Christ. We pray for all who are overwhelmed with sorrow, for those who are suddenly seized by evil, or that which appears to be evil to the narrow vision of human ignorance. Thou knowest that life is hard to some, the battle never ceases; there is hardly any taste of victory in all the long fight: God help such, and tell them that after all the time is short, and may end any moment, and that the Lord will suddenly come to the rescue of those who put their trust in him. To others life is all sunshine, an easy victory, a swift run through places of flowers and still waters: the Lord save them in the time of danger, show them that all wealth is dangerous, all prosperity is perilous, all strength is temptation to self-trust. The Lord lend a hand to the blind man, or he will fall in the thoroughfare; the Lord take up the weary man and give him rest awhile

or he will fall for want of breath; the Lord speak to the poor and the outcast, and the far away, and by the awakening of memory, or the rekindling of inspirations and new possibilities of thought and force, draw men to a new standing, and give all men some sense of liberty and growth. The Lord sanctify affliction of every kind and degree, whether falling suddenly on the life, or creeping upon it slowly and devouring it little by little; still let the sanctification of thy presence be found in the chamber of affliction and sorrow. Save us, we beseech thee, from all false trust; may we abhor that which is evil, and cleave to that which is good; may it be our joy to follow Christ even up the steepest way, and to find in his presence all helpful grace. Pity our littlenesses and infirmities: for are we not creatures of the dust and children of the wind, except it be that we realise our relation to thyself, in whom alone we find our glory and eternity. The Lord encourage every one who is in bewilderment and longing for release and light; the Lord keep us steadily to our work, and may we not relax our hold upon the plough until the going down of the sun. Let the Lord's heaven descend upon us, so that we may overhear its music, and be made glad by some hint of its ineffable rest. Amen.

Chapter xiii.

1. On that day they read [*Heb.* there was read] in the book of Moses [Numb. xxii. 5; Deut. xxiii. 3] in the audience [*Heb.* ears] of the people; and therein was found written, that the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever;

2. Because they met not the children of Israel with bread and with water, but hired Balaam against them, that he should curse them: howbeit our God turned the curse into a blessing [see Numb. xxiii. 7–11; xxiv. 3–19].

3. Now it came to pass, when they had heard the law, that they separated from Israel all the mixed multitude.

4. ¶ And before this, Eliashib the priest, having the oversight [*Heb.* being set over] of the chamber [the entire out-building or "lean-to," which surrounded the temple on three sides, and was made up of three stories, each containing a number of rooms, some smaller, some larger (see 1 Kings vi. 5–10)] of the house of our God, was allied [connected by marriage] unto Tobiah:

5. And he had prepared for him a great chamber, where aforetime they laid the meat offerings, the frankincense, and the vessels, and the tithes of the corn, the new wine, and the oil, which was commanded to be given to the Levites, and the singers, and the porters; and the offerings of the priests [*i.e.* the portion of the offerings assigned for their sustenance to the priests].

6. But in all this time was not I at Jerusalem: for in the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon came I unto the king, and after certain days [*Heb.* at the end of days] obtained I [*or*, I earnestly requested] leave of the king:

7. And I came to Jerusalem, and understood of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah, in preparing him a chamber in the courts of the house of God.

8. And it grieved me sore: therefore I cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber.

9. Then I commanded, and they cleansed the chambers: and thither brought I again the vessels of the house of God, with the meat offering and the frankincense.

10. ¶ And I perceived that the portions of the Levites had not been given them: for the Levites and the singers, that did the work, were fled every one to his field.

11. Then contended I with the rulers, and said, Why is the house of God forsaken? And I gathered them together [Nehemiah gathered the Levites from their lands, and reinstated them in their set offices], and set them in their place [*Heb.* standing].

12. Then brought all Judah the tithe of the corn and the new wine and the oil unto the treasuries [*or*, storehouses].

13. And I made treasurers over the treasuries, Shelemiah the priest, and Zadok the scribe [probably the same as Zidkijah of ch. x. 1], and of the Levites, Pedaiah: and next to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah: for they were counted faithful, and their office was to distribute unto their brethren.

14. Remember me [once more the faithful servant of God begs a merciful remembrance of what he had done for the honour of God in the "observances" of the temple], O my God, concerning this, and wipe not out my good deeds [*Heb.* kindnesses] that I have done for the house of my God, and for the offices [observations] thereof.

15. ¶ In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day: and I testified against them in the day [*rather*, concerning the day] wherein they sold victuals.

16. There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem.

17. Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day? [The desecration of the Sabbath is first brought into prominence among the sins of the Jewish people by Jeremiah (see ch. xvii. 21–27). It could not but have gained ground during the captivity, when foreign masters would not have allowed the cessation of labour one day in seven. On the return from captivity, the sabbatical rest appears to have been one of the institutions most difficult to re-establish.]

18. Did not your fathers thus [cf. Jer. xvii. 21–27], and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the sabbath.

19. And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath [*i.e.* at the sunset of the day before the sabbath; since the sabbath was regarded as commencing on the previous evening], I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the sabbath: and some of my servants [comp. ch. iv. 16–23; v. 16] set I at the gates, that there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day.

20. So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice.

21. Then I testified against them, and said unto them, Why lodge ye about [*Heb.* before] the wall [*The Speaker's Commentary* says: The lodging of the merchants with their merchandise just outside Jerusalem during the sabbath, while they impatiently waited for the moment when they might bring their wares in, was thought by Nehemiah to be unseemly, and to have an irreligious tendency. He therefore threatened the merchants with arrest if they continued the practice]? if ye do so again, I will lay hands on you. From that time forth came they no more on the sabbath.

22. And I commanded the Levites [at first Nehemiah had employed his own retinue in the work of keeping the gates; but, as this was inconvenient, he now made a change, and assigned the duty to the Levites, as one which properly belonged to them, since the object of the regulation was the due observance of the sabbath], that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day. Remember me [In this prayer also Nehemiah commits his fidelity to the merciful estimate of God. But something in connection with the sabbath, or with his retrospect of his own conduct, gives the passing prayer a peculiar pathos of humility], O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness [*or*, multitude] of thy mercy.

23. ¶ In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab:

24. And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod [a mixture of Philistine and Aramic], and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people [*Heb.* of people and people].

25. And I contended with them, and cursed [*or*, reviled] them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair [scarcely with his own hand. The meaning rather is that Nehemiah caused them to be thus punished], and made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves.

26. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God [comp. 2 Sam. xii. 24, 25], and God made him king over all Israel: nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin.

27. Shall we then hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives?

28. And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was son in law to Sanballat the Horonite: therefore I chased him from me. [Eliashib himself was allied by marriage to Tobiah, and one of his grandsons was married to Sanballat. Him Nehemiah drove into exile.]

29. Remember them [this priestly violation of law is committed to God alone for punishment], O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites.

30. [This is a brief recapitulation of the special work of Nehemiah after his return.] Thus cleansed I them [after the acts of discipline described above there was doubtless some formal service of expiation] from all strangers, and appointed the wards of the priests and the Levites, every one in his business;

31. And for the wood offering, at times appointed, and for the firstfruits.

[No special provision was made by the law for the supply of wood necessary to keep fire ever burning upon the altar; nor do David or Solomon appear to have instituted any definite regulations on the subject. It remained for Nehemiah to establish a system by which the duty of supplying the wood should be laid as a burthen in turn on the various clans or families, which were regarded as constituting the nation. The lot was used to determine the order in which the several families should perform the duty. A special day (the fourteenth of the fifth month, according to Josephus) was appointed for the bringing in of the supply; and this day was after a time regarded as a high festival, and called "The Festival of the Wood Offering."]

Remember me, O my God, for good.

[With these words (Bishop ELLICOTT'S *Commentary*) Nehemiah leaves the scene, committing himself and his discharge of duty to the righteous Judge. His conscientious fidelity had brought him into collision not only with external enemies, but with many of his own brethren. His rigorous reformation has been assailed by many moralists and commentators in every age. But in these words he commits all to God, as it were by anticipation. It may be added that with these words end the annals of the Old Testament History.]

NEHEMIAH'S TEMPER AND QUESTIONS.

WHAT a different man is Nehemiah when the first chapter and the last of his book are brought into contrast! In the first chapter Nehemiah is meek enough; we read that—it came to pass, when he heard certain words, that he "sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven" (i. 4),—all that could be done in a private house. In the last chapter we find him laying about him with tremendous fury. He hurls everything out of his way in a righteous rage. There is nothing about weeping, and mourning, and fasting. The last chapter is a thunderstorm. Yet the first and the last are related; the man who cannot weep—that is to say, the man who cannot feel deeply and acutely—can never do any great and permanent reforming work in the world; the man who cannot fast—that is to say, hold himself in severest control—can never strike with any real effect; the man who cannot pray—that is to say, connect himself with all the highest forces and energies of the universe, ally himself with the very omnipotence of God—can never stand forth in heroic fearlessness and courage almost divine. In the first chapter we have the man's inner nature—in the last chapter we have the man at

work; and between the two, though the contrast is outwardly so striking, there is an intimate and necessary relation.

What questions he asks! all reformation should be preceded by inquiry. Circumstances develop men. Nehemiah began in the history as a cupbearer; he ends in the same history as a mighty, resolute, beneficent reformer, never in any one of his reforms promoting his own interests, narrowly viewed as such, but everywhere considering the public weal, re-establishing law and order, that society may be secured and enabled to make useful progress. Nehemiah did not care who had done the mischief, he was bent upon undoing it. It was a priest who had "the oversight of the chamber of the house of our God," who had allied himself unto Tobiah, whose history we have studied; and that same priest had prepared for the enemy a great chamber, and when Nehemiah came he knotted as it were whipcord and laid about him, so that they who had done evil might suffer in the body for the mischief they had wrought. Possession was not to him nine points of the law. The man was in the wrong place, and he must be routed out. It was in vain to plead possession, prescriptive right, a kind of quasi-legal entrance upon the property: Nehemiah said, This is not yours; it was not in the gift of any man; you must be put out of this, and you must take care of your stuff, or it will be thrown into the fire. An awkward man to deal with! Tobiah could have borne any amount of argument, and he looked serene in the face of most eloquent persuasiveness; but Nehemiah was a man of action as well as a man of thought; he gave but little time to moving; the moving was to be accomplished; and it was well understood that when Nehemiah had made up his mind to a course, that course was as good as run.

Look at some of the questions which Nehemiah put:—

"Then contended I with the rulers, and said, Why is the house of God forsaken?" (v. 11).

This is the voice of a man who means to hold the house of God in highest reverence. We dare not adopt the question now, because it is out of consonance with the spirit of Jesus Christ, that spirit being one of persuasion, reasoning, sympathy, entreaty,

—well imaged in the words, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him." Still, we owe much to the spirit of Nehemiah. There was a time when the spirit of order and right could assert itself in very forcible terms. The earth was not made beautiful without much volcanic energy, without great upheavals and tumults: the sward that is on the top of it was not always there; it comes after great contention, conflict, stirring together, and a tremendous coalition of forces well-nigh infinite. It is the same with human history. We have come to halcyon days: we wonder that the sward is not more velvet-like, we complain if everything is not brought to the highest polish of civilisation; we now argue with men, and entreat them to do things which aforetime would have been commanded and insisted upon. The former is the better plan. It is founded on an eternal principle. Yet who shall say that we are not much indebted even to physical force and positive penal law for a good deal that is best amongst us to-day? Who can be sure that our penalties have not ended in very much of our best refinement, our highest forbearance and self-control and moral dignity? The point, however, to be kept in view is this—that there was a man who cared for God's house. That man ought to live through all time. He does live. His influence is not always exercised in the same way; but there is always in the human heart a great wonder, a mighty passion, leading to strenuous effort in the direction of filling the house of God. When God's house is cared for, no other house is neglected. We are not referring to that sentimental regard for the building which can leave other things to run to ruin, but of that intelligent, rational, reverent solicitude for the house of God, which expresses itself in all industries, and in every aspect of loving conscientious faithfulness. Let this be judged of by reality and fact. The matter is open to inquest upon almost statistical ground. Who cares for God's business shall be cared for by God. "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" was the question which Christ propounded. Let us put it in the new form—Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's house? The idea remains unimpaired. When we are about God's house in the right spirit the redemptive God is taking care of our home. He lives a foolish life who seeks his life upon narrow grounds.

He that would save his life must know how to lose it; he who would save the little must attend to the great; he who would have all things added unto him must seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Look at another question:—

"What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day?" (v. 17).

The same man here evinces the same spirit. The house of God and the day of God go together; they stand or fall together. The work of God is one, and his purpose is undivided, and all his ordinances interrelate themselves to one another, so that if you touch one you touch the whole, if you break the least you break the greatest. A marvellous unity of thought and purpose and law we find in the house of God! Nehemiah was a Sabbatarian of the severest type. We do well not to imitate his action in this matter. There can be no Sabbath-keeping by law. We cannot force a man to keep the day of God. We can compel him to withdraw from visible participation in merchandise; we can compel him to close his windows, and to give all his servants holiday; so far we can go. But unless the Sabbatic spirit is in the man there will be no Sabbath kept by him. It is the heart that obeys; it is the heart that is religious. We are not good because we assent to certain propositions and obey certain laws: we are only good because the spirit is at one in rational and loving consonance with God. Here again we must almost go to statistics for proof of the utility and beneficence of Sabbath-keeping. Let us rest this question on the strongest grounds, namely, those that are spiritual, social, healthful, beneficial, in every aspect and issue, and then our argument cannot be overthrown. If we should institute a comparison between those who keep the Sabbath with those who do not keep it, there can be no risk in believing that those who truly in their hearts consecrate a portion of their time to God are the best men: if they are not they ought to be; they do not live up to their profession of the Son of man. He ought to be the best man who sets apart a portion of his property, a portion of his time, to religious uses, and who does so not to escape a penalty but to express a high and noble sentiment of gratitude. If he is not the best man,

then he is misusing his opportunity, playing false with his religious actions, and is unequal in his inner man and moral purpose to that which is outward and that which is externally attractive and good. The Sabbath, therefore, can only be kept by men who want to keep it. All our statutes and acts of parliament and preventatives are useless, and worse than useless, irritating and exasperating, unless there be a spirit in man which responds to the spirit of the Sabbath, and says, This is the gift of God; this is needful on social grounds, on healthful grounds, on religious grounds; therefore, the Sabbath should be kept holy unto the Lord.

So far did Nehemiah succeed that he drove out a good many who were doing business within the city on the Sabbath day. But they were not to be easily deterred: they loitered behind the wall; they thought they would watch their opportunity for doing a little business even on Nehemiah's Sabbath day. But Nehemiah was an out-and-out reformer; he did not look in one direction only, he looked over the wall, and seeing these men loitering about he said, If you come there again I will lay hands upon you—be off! The tone was needed at that time. Historically, it was right; the men could understand no other argument. There are persons who cannot understand a preacher, but they have some dim conception of a constable. Nehemiah, therefore, played the inspector, and looked over the wall, and hunted the rats out of their hole, and drove them away with righteous indignation, threatening them that if they returned they would be detained. A man of this kind is always useful in society; and the men who criticise him most severely are not always unwilling to realise the benefits which his policy secures: they will take whatever he may bring to them in the way of advantage, and then they will scrutinise severely his policy and his spirit, and wish that he were a man of another temper. Men of so-called bad temper have been of great use in society. Their temper has not been bad when looked at within the proper limits and in the right light: it was only bad to the men who were themselves bad, and who wished to escape judgment. There is a righteous indignation. There is a godly jealousy. There is an anger that may not cease with the shining of the sun, but burn

at night and be ready for the morning, that evil may be contemned and scorched and destroyed.

This was the man Nehemiah. What probably enraged him more than anything else was the intermarriage of the Jews with the heathen. There he became most sublimely indignant; said he, "In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: and their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people. And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair," and made them swear in God's name that they would never do it again. This man was once only cupbearer; once he was a "mute inglorious Milton"; once he sat down and wept and mourned and fasted and prayed. Comparing the verse which represents him so doing with the twenty-fifth verse of the last chapter of his book, we find, though a great change passes in the matter of emotion and contemplation and action, the man is one and the same. The great argument was, "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things?" his argument being, You have history to guide, you have example and warning on every hand; you are not guiltless, but doubly guilty, because even the king of Israel sinned in this way and incurred the judgment and displeasure of heaven. Here Nehemiah stood upon sound ground. He knew what had happened in the history of the world, which so few men know. Men may know the history of the world in bare facts and dates, in battles and victories, and coronations and changes of dynasty and policy, and yet know nothing about the central moral line that runs through all history and makes it organic, and turns it into a great teaching instrument. If we know dates only we know nothing about history. History has a moral aspect, and we must study its *morale*, its aims in relation to the moral health of the people, if we would grasp its philosophy and usefully apply its largest lesson.

Here, then, we have discipline, earnestness, definiteness,—the very Cromwell of the Old Testament, the man with a rod in his hand; and nothing stands in his way when he has right

to vindicate, when he has law to protect. Where are the Nehemiahs of to-day? There are none. Where are the Cromwells of to-day? They are in the grave. Look at this man's attitude as described by himself; omitting the interstitial matter, let us catch all words in which he describes his personal action:—"I cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber"—"Then contended I with the rulers"—"I testified against them"—"I contended with the nobles of Judah"—"I commanded that the gates should be shut"—"I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves"—"I said unto the Sabbath-breakers, If ye do so again, I will lay hands on you"—"I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God"—"I chased one of the sons of Joiada from me"—"Thus cleansed I them." And so he passes away from us in a great storm of reformation. "I contended—I commanded—I cast forth—I chased—I said—Thus I cleansed." He is not ashamed to speak of himself. He was indeed the only man of his time worth speaking about. He was as the very Spirit of judgment amongst the people. If we do not want Nehemiah's violence we want his earnestness. Never forget the distinction between these two terms. There may be those who condemn the violence of Nehemiah, and then sink into indifference regarding all that is sacred and noble and useful in human history. Do not let us escape on the plea that the day of violence has gone: the day of earnestness ought never to go.

What a time Nehemiah would have of it if he lived now! And what a time we should have of it if that same circumstance occurred! Nehemiah made his influence felt. Could he see what we see in all the capitals of the world, and yet hold his tongue, and pass down to church that he might say his own prayers, and find his own covert way to heaven? He would often be late for church; he would stand by the wayside to curse and denounce, and issue the judgments of God upon the things that are happening even in Metropolitan thoroughfares. Nehemiah could not look upon the sights which afflict our eyes without protestation. We have lost the spirit of Protestantism. We now make it a mere ecclesiastical term, whereas in its

etymology and earliest history it was nothing of the kind. A Protestant is a witness—a man who testifies, witnesses to certain truth. If there were no Roman Catholic Church, Protestantism would still remain, as vital, energetic, and beneficent as ever, because it means testifying, witnessing, laying the hand of identification upon evil, and saying, Thou art wrong! I curse thee in the name of God. That is Protestantism—not going to chapel instead of going to church; not wearing a Geneva gown instead of some elaborately-decorated ritualistic garment. To protest is to witness. Nehemiah would be the leader of the Protestants. Could Nehemiah see the faces of the poor ground every day and say, "Nothing can be done: 'the poor ye have always with you:' it is a great mystery, and we must wait for its solution?" He might have to say that, but he would do a good deal before he did say it. He would go with these poor people and say, I will watch the whole process; I will see how you are treated, and you shall not be involved in my inspection, and I will beard the oppressor who crushes you, be his name what it may; though he be a pew-holder in my church, I will smite him in the face with a fist of righteousness. Could Nehemiah hear about our poor seamstresses being drilled by some commercial devil, and never say a word about it, but generalise on the mysteries of trade, and the difficulties of commerce, and the law of supply and demand, and the exactions of political economy? No! he would be more on the side of human nature than upon the side of any science that ever was invented for getting the last drop of blood out of a poor worker.

We much need Nehemiah's earnestness, we repeat, without Nehemiah's violence. We have already admitted that there was a time when violence itself might be historically justifiable, but even violence was inspired by earnestness. If the fury has been less, the passion and love of righteousness should still remain. If we were in earnest we could do more: we could make the country too hot for any man who was living by robbery and by oppression and cruelty; we should so organise ourselves as to get at the most skilfully concealed oppressor; we could make him feel that he is not to dine every day upon the flesh of human creatures, and drink his wine out of the skulls of his fellow

men. Do not say that nothing can be done. A moral sentiment can be created, a grand public opinion can be organised, and the most cunning workers of evil can be made to feel that there is a spirit in the air, an invisible, ghostly, awful spirit,—the spirit of righteousness, the spirit of humanity, the spirit of pity, the spirit of judgment: there may be absence of visible organisation and positive definition, yet there will be a feeling that the enemy is behind or in front, or on the right hand or on the left, or just above or just below, but there he is,—the enemy so-called —the enemy of wrong-doing, the enemy of cruelty, the enemy of shamelessness, but the friend of God, and the true friend of man.

Can we not rouse ourselves to some heroic endeavour in this direction? One thing surely we can do: we can ask significant questions. Nehemiah pushed his inquiries as he might have thrust spears into the consciences of men. When the question is raised the answer may come; but if we do not raise the question we cannot be concerned about the issue. Why are all these thousands of children so ragged, so poverty-stricken, so hungered, so neglected? We can at least put the question, and we can put it with unction, we can ask it as if we meant it; and there is a way of asking some questions that amounts almost to their solution. We are not to make them questions of conversation, not to be eating our own smoking venison and drinking our own foaming wine, and asking how the poor live, and say how shocking it is that so many people should have nothing to eat and drink. That is not moral comment that has any value in it. There is, let us never forget, a way of putting a question that means that we are on the outlook for opportunities, and that the moment the opportunity can be secured it will be realised in the interests of man, in the interests of righteousness. Now all this is in the happiest accord with the Spirit of Jesus Christ. We need not go to the Old Testament for heroic reformers, for fundamental reconstructors of human history. All the men that went before him, who burned with the right spirit, pointed towards One who was coming, whose name is the Son of man, who so loved the world as to die for it, who on his way to the cross made that way the steeper and thornier because he said,

Woe unto you, devourers of widows' houses, plunderers, thieves, hypocrites, whited sepulchres! If he did go to the cross, he might have gone by another and smoother road, but his road was all cross, it was the way of the cross; when he was born he died, when he died he was born. Jesus Christ could not be in our streets without putting searching questions. The Saviour of the world could not see holy things trampled upon without protest at least. Blessed is that people among whom there are many men with loud, clear, resonant voices, who will not let evil pass unchecked, unchallenged, but who, even if they have no means of immediate remedy, will still ask questions, and make their inquiries solemn as the judgment of God. When the Spirit of Jesus Christ comes back to the Church, the Church will rectify social problems, will defend the weak, will secure the rights of the poor, and will show that it is not an organism for the cultivation of sentiment, but an organism whose symbol is the cross, whose baptism is of blood, whose object is to save the world.

"HANDFULS OF PURPOSE,"

FOR ALL GLEANERS.

"And said, I beseech thee."—NEH. i. 5.

The subject is Remembered Prayers. —Nehemiah here cites, to all appearance, the very terms which he used in addressing the heavenly throne.—It is not necessary, however, to recollect the precise words in order to enjoy a refreshing memory of the intercourse which we have had with God.—The intercourse, indeed, is not in the words at all, but in the thoughts which those words endeavour to convey.—It would be proper for us to give new words to the old thoughts; and, provided we faithfully represented the thoughts, we should be entitled to say that we had quoted the prayer.—There are prayers which we can never forget—prayers in personal extremity, prayers in the sick-chamber, prayers on battlefields, prayers for those in whose lives our own were involved, and without whom it seemed impossible for us to live. The memorable prayers do not throw into insignificance the prayers which are not so precisely remembered.—In prayer, as n everything else, there must be long ranges of comparative flatness; only now and then do we ascend the high mountains and enjoy the breezes that blow there from the gates of heaven. —Unhappy is the man who has no prayers to remember—the man who can only go back in his memory to find a dim record of frivolous expressions, foolish plans, unwise attempts to be wise, and a whole store of things, not one of which is of any value.—Lay up in memory, for reading, for old age, quotations for time of difficulty; make the soul familiar with prayer, and then we shall have no difficulty in re-living our lives and visiting old altars where we won great victories in the name of Christ.

"This is nothing else but sorrow of heart."—NEH. ii. 2.

All men know the meaning of silent sorrow.—There is a language of the face, an eloquence of the eye, a persuasiveness and pathos of mien, which no orator ever rivalled in his most impassioned moods.—Some people seem to be doomed to the suppression of sorrow; they cannot afford the time to weep and mourn and make a demonstration of their sadness—"A little weeping would ease my heart."—The sorrow of Nehemiah was not a selfish grief. He himself was in circumstances marked by luxuriousness and honour, but how could he be otherwise than sad of heart as he remembered the fate of his people? —This is the beneficent altruism.—A gloom would come over every feast if the guests could remember how many thousands are starving.—The merriest

heart would pause in its mirthfulness on recollecting that the whole world is under the condemnation of death.—"The air is full of farewells to the dying."—This may be a sentiment which ought to be discouraged, and men should be exhorted to take the best and brightest view of life: at the same time we impoverish our best nature by excluding from contemplation the sorrows, the burdens, the groanings of men who are our kindred, our compatriots, and our brethren in all deepest and truest sense of the word.—"Rejoice with them that do rejoice" is an exhortation associated with "Weep with them that weep."—What concerns human nature concerns every man.—Christianity came to destroy all self-living and self-idolatry: no man liveth unto himself: whether we live, we live unto the Lord; whether we die, we die unto the Lord; living or dying, we are the Lord's.—We shall know whether our feeling is true and deep by the sacrifices we are prepared to make on its account.—The sentiment that is content to perish in evaporation is neither wise nor useful, but is on all accounts to be condemned and abhorred.—All false sentiment weakens the nature; all true sentiment elevates and enlarges manhood.

"*Neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem.*"—NEH. ii. 12.

The fool tells all he knows, and much that he does not know. Always have the heart full of good thoughts known only to God and itself.—Men may speak away all their strength; that is, they may talk so much as to become quite weak.—First do the good.—The preacher should not tell what a good sermon he is going to preach; he should simply preach it.—In the morning be very silent: at night bring home your record. Your friends may blame you for not talking in advance. Pay no heed to their reproach.—What good am I going to do this day? God put thoughts into Nehemiah's heart, and he must put them into mine. One thing I can do, I can open the door of my heart and give the blessed Spirit welcome.—I must not forget that there are at least many things I must *not* do; I must not brood over injuries, nor be hard upon the weak, nor rob the hireling, nor expect more from men than they can be or do; my own weakness must make me humble; my own faults must check my judgment of others. O thou giver of all good thoughts, fill my heart with grace, and help me to walk step by step in the way of him who went about doing good. Broken walls now are to be built up, and if I cannot lay the stones myself I may at least carry the stones to the men who have skill to build. I bless thee, Lord of my salvation, for this good desire. Now I will go forth and work.

"... *gave them the king's letters.*"—NEH. ii. 9.

It would have been useless for Nehemiah to appear in his own person, or to attempt to operate upon his own authority.—Nehemiah was a great man, but in the direction in which he was now moving he was as impotent as others. Only a royal sanction could open his way, and secure him full success.—Here is a beautiful picture of the attitude of the Christian evangelist.—When he goes abroad he has no introduction of himself to make, he simply delivers the King's letters.—When one was complaining to the Duke of Wellington as to the ill-success of missionary effort, the Iron Duke replied, "What are your marching orders?" and he quoted the words of Christ—"Go ye into all the world, and preach the

gospel to every creature:" by that military exhortation the old soldier was prepared to abide; it was not a suggestion, it was an imperative injunction.—When the preacher appears in the pulpit, all he has to do is to give the people the King's letters; when the student bends his head over his desk in the study, it is only that he may study what is written in the letters of the King.—The moment we begin to write letters of commendation for ourselves, we become as other men: our distinctiveness as ambassadors is lost: we have to apologise where we ought to demand.—The King's letters are full of light and love.—They are addressed to every man.—There is something in Holy Scripture for every soul that breathes.—It is instructive to notice how those letters abound in commandments, positive claims, appeals for surrender, and the like.—A king's letters should be kingly: they should combine the imperative with the gracious, with obvious skill: they ought to be noble in their diction, and conciliatory in their tone: they ought to demand, and yet to beseech: under all the persuasion, however, there must lie a line of royal claim and inevitable behest.—Have not preachers too often forgotten the commanding side of the King's letters?

"*Neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work.*"—NEH. ii. 16.

This indicates the wisdom of silence when great enterprises are on hand.—Nehemiah had only with him some few men who had understanding of his purpose and sympathy with his spirit.—There is a time when we want as few people with us as possible.—There are occasions when a man may have too many friends, advisers, and confidants.—There are solemn hours in life when a man must be his own human adviser; he must hold counsel with none but with God and his own heart.—Consultation means deference.—The moment you take a man into your fellowship and ask his opinion, you seem bound to concede something to him, which may weaken your own energy.—In all great action consider the case privately.—Enter thy closet and shut thy door, and speak to thy Father in secret; and having come to understand the will of heaven, open the door, and go forth with the energy of a man who is inspired, and to whom failure is divinely forbidden.—How many men waste themselves by speaking too much! Many lives that might have done well have evaporated in useless words and protestations.—Beware of the man who tells you all his plans before he has begun to work at them; he may seem to be friendly and confidential, but when he parts with his secret he parts with his strength.—The silent or secret worker often brings himself under misconstruction.—The most of people like to know what is going to be done, and when they are not informed of the policy that is about to be tried, they complain that they have not been treated with due courtesy and confidence.—Such people are not to be heeded in their complaints: the strong man is to go forth confident in the almightiness of God.

"*So built we the wall.*"—NEH. iv. 6.

Here is the oneness of the object which Nehemiah had in view.—From morning to night the cry was, The wall, the wall!—It was in vain to tempt Nehemiah to speak upon any other subject.—It is said that the man of one book is always formidable, because he knows it so well, and has in a sense made it his own.—What is true of the one book is true of the one

object.—The Apostle Paul said, "This one thing I do;" he enjoined the young evangelists to give themselves wholly to their work, and to see that no man took their crown.—It may appear to be little and narrow to have only one object in life; but it is better to succeed in one object that is good than to fail in a hundred that are questionable. — There is a genius of concentration as well as a statesmanship that can grasp all that is diverse and diffuse.—The most of us are called to do one thing in life.—Generally, the men who fail are men who leave their legitimate work and attempt incidental experiments; they cannot be content with the simple, straightforward line of action which ought to run through every day, so they are continually turning to the right hand and to the left, and doing innumerable things that need not be done, and at the end of the day they have nothing to show for their labour but weariness and disappointment.—Young man, have a wall to build.—Church of Christ, have a wall to build.—Student preparing for the severe struggle of life, have a wall to build.—Always have a definite object, and always let it be known that you are to be found at your work, and not seeking holiday excitement or intoxication that dissipates the strength and beclouds the whole outlook of life.

"*For the people had a mind to work.*"—NEH. iv. 6.

Now Nehemiah divides his honours. —This the great leader is always willing to do.—In a sense, the general wins the battle, but where would the general be if he had no army?—Great generals always take heed of those who are foremost in the fight, who show great courage, who are not to be quelled by the spirit of danger; the names of such are sent home that they may be marked with honour. —Nehemiah looked upon the people as essential to his success.—Every minister must do the same.—Every head of business must regard his *employé* as part and parcel of himself in the accomplishment of commercial success.—This is the true spirit of co-operation.—The master is nothing without his servant. — The author is nothing without his readers.— The king is no king if he have no subjects, and he is the great king who is the subject of his own kingdom.— Here we find the splendid energy of true voluntaryism.—The people were not driven to their work, or compelled to work, or taxed for not working; their whole mind and heart went out in the direction of labour, and their joy was to see the wall rising.—Love will do more than law.—We say that the Jew gave a tenth, but he did it under the pressure of law, whereas Christians are no longer under the law: that is true, but they are under grace, which makes larger demands upon a man than any law can do: grace goes farther into the heart, sinks more deeply into the will, inflames more completely the whole nature; to grace, therefore, we must look for triumphs impossible to compulsion.

"*There is much rubbish.*"—NEH. iv. 10.

So the work was not allowed to proceed upon a clear space.—There is always a negative work to be done before great constructions can be proceeded with.—This is not understood generally by those who make statistics of spiritual activity; it is the wall that is measured, not the "rubbish" that is estimated.—What rubbish of ignorance, prejudice, false association, must be removed before the Christian teacher can begin his work!—Much learning has to be unlearned, because it proceeds on a false basis, or is unadapted to the

capacity of the learner.—Where is there a clear space in any country in which the Christian teacher may begin at once to build his wall? It is very disheartening to be spending much time in removing rubbish; we must look, however, at what is necessary, at what indeed is absolutely essential; we must not build on rubbish, we must not be anxious for the kind of progress that is not thorough; unless the foundation is really good, the building itself will only be to our discredit, for it will soon fall.—It would seem to be easier to create rubbish than to build walls.—Any man can do mischief; any man can obstruct good work: any hearer can set up a point of opposition to the most earnest and inspiring teaching.—We are called upon to remove false trusts, religious sophisms, superstitious prejudices, selfish calculations, and an infinite mass of rubbish.—Some men are skilled in this department of service, who are not so skilled in building the wall.—All parties must work together in the uprearing of the living Church.

None of us put off our clothes, saving that every one put them off for washing."—NEH. iv. 23.

This showed the earnestness of Nehemiah and his band of workers.—Nehemiah is careful to mention that he himself was subject to this arrangement. —"So neither I, nor my brethren, nor my servants, nor the men of the guard which followed me, none of us put off our clothes, saving that every one put them off for washing."—This is wonderful captaincy on the part of Nehemiah. —Everything was done on a military basis.—Some people waste all their energy in putting off and on their clothes: their whole life is a question of clothes: they cannot do anything until their clothes are right.—Nehemiah showed how he distinguished between the necessary and the unnecessary.—Every man put off his clothes for washing—for the washing of the clothes and for the washing of himself. —We must attend to health if we are to attend to successful toil.—Time is not wasted that is spent in obeying the laws of life.—Is our life a life of discipline? Have we thrown off all self-criticism and self-control, and abandoned ourselves to the enjoyment of the flesh and the cultivation of social manners?—A man cannot be punctilious about his clothes, and at the same time punctilious about duties in days of danger.—When the man knows that he himself is greater than his clothes, he will see to it that the work is first attended to, and then other things will be left to follow as they may.

"*And I was very angry when I heard their cry and these words.*"—NEH. v. 6.

There is a time to be angry.—If a man cannot be angry, neither can he be pleased.—Only he who can burn as an oven can be gracious and gentle and sympathetic.—Our public men should more frequently be angry, yea, very angry, and should find in their anger a species of inspiration.—Nehemiah's was a noble anger; it was not a petty, fretful, spiteful resentment; it was the anger of a man who saw that injustice had been done.—In the presence of injustice every good man is angry.—When we cease to be angry in the presence of oppression we have ceased to hold fellowship with the Spirit of Righteousness, which is the Spirit of God.—He who works from conviction will work earnestly, steadily, self-sacrificingly.—Anger must be translated into action.—Nehemiah adopted a course of self-consultation, and having "consulted with myself," he says, "I rebuked the nobles and the rulers."—There is a time

for rebuke.—Men must not be allowed to do evil deeds, and to escape moral criticism.—He who begins with judgment may see his way in the direction of ultimate redemption.

"*And the people did according to this promise.*"—NEH. v. 13.

How well Nehemiah always speaks of the people! He cannot forget their devotedness and their faithfulness.—There is a time when "promise" only is possible: the time for action has not fully come: but men can make up their minds what they will do as circumstances develop.—If people would do according to their promises what wondrous results would be seen in every department of Church life! Some men have promised gold, others have promised service, others have promised faithful attendance at the house of God and generous co-operation with all its offices and functions.—Some made promises on sick-beds; some made promises in storms at sea; some made promises in the presence of affliction that seemed to be unto death on the part of those whom they most deeply loved: where are those promises? Is heaven stored with promissory notes that have not been redeemed? Is it enough to speak a promise and to forget it?—He who forgets a promise is not to be trusted.—The word of honour should be severer than the bond of law.—Let us set down in order the promises we have made to heaven and begin to redeem them one by one: and soon the circle in which we live shall feel a glow of gratitude and a radiance of joy.

"*Gashmu saith it.*"—NEH. vi. 6.

By accommodation these words may be used to set forth the folly of those who undertake to send abroad mischievous reports.—When we wish to make an impression we are seldom careful as to the evidence on which we rely: if the impression is to be made, it must be made at all risks and costs.—Sanballat came to Nehemiah with an open letter in his hand, wherein was written, "It is reported among the heathen, and Gashmu saith it, that thou and the Jews think to rebel."—Gashmu told lies.—Gashmu may stand for the anonymous element in social life.—It sounds as if it were a name associated with elevation and authority, and any name of that kind will serve the purpose when wicked men wish to overthrow the labours of honest patriots!—Who is Gashmu? What right had he to say anything about the business? Are strong men to be turned aside by anonymous reporters? Are we to be made afraid because of a man who is behind the veil, and who is whispering words of suspicion just loud enough for us to hear them?—All this section of our life, which may be called the section of superstition, must be swept away or reconstructed and purified, so that only the voice of reason and the dictate of true judgment can be heard.—How many of us are affrighted by the expression "They say"! Who are *they?* Descend to particulars; give us names, authorities, places, dates.—When the persons called "they" are discovered, it will be generally found that they disclaim the authenticity of the reports which are associated with their names.—Do let us be convinced in our hearts; let us have the consent of our own judgment: let us burn with earnestness; and in the presence of such moral qualification all Gashmus will turn away from us in fear and shame.

"*I perceived that God had not sent him.*" NEH. vi. 12.

There is a spirit in man.—Intuition has an important part to play in the

education of human life.—They who live closely with God are blessed with a power which may well be described as the discernment of spirits.—"Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits, whether they be of God." We know when men are speaking truth. —There is a faculty within us which confirms or contradicts, according to the quality of the man who addresses us.—The false teacher can be detected, though he be eloquent, powerful, fascinating, and most persuasive.—Who can disguise the hollowness of falsehood?—On the other hand, we know the true shepherd: "My sheep know my voice; a stranger will they not follow:" the scribe said, "Master, thou hast said the truth:" the centurion said, "Truly this man was the Son of God:" Pilate's wife described Jesus as "a just person."—The true teacher may have little to recommend him of an external kind: his speech may not be with enticing words of man's wisdom: he may speak that which is folly to the worldly mind: but in the long run he will prove that he is a messenger of God, more anxious to make certain vital truths known than to study the manner in which they should be conveyed.—True men should support true men, and should never lend themselves to the petty criticism of mere method or manner.—The first point to discover is whether a man is really in earnest, whether God has sent him; and if the hearer be true to his own conscience, to his best moral instincts, he will often perceive whether a man has been sent or has not been sent of God.—Be true to yourselves; let your inmost nature speak.—In every heart there is a sanctuary, a holy of holies, and from that innermost place must come the directing and judicial voice.

"*They perceived that this work was wrought of our God.*"—NEH. vi. 16.

If they did not perceive this at first they perceived it at last.—What we have to do is to go on with the work, for the work is self-revealing and self-commending.—It is beautiful to notice how Nehemiah directs attention to the work.—He says nothing about himself; not a word of admiration regarding his courage and energy does he insert; but he proclaims that as the work proceeded people began to see the hand of God rather than the hand of man.—This is the great crown of Christian evidence. —Christianity does not stand in any merely literary defence, although its literary defence is complete; it stands rather in its beneficent accomplishments, in its regenerated hearts, its elevated lives, its new spirit of consecration, its broad unselfishness, its generous sympathy.—"Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see:" quote the miracles, tell about the men you have seen who have leaped into newness of life, who have recovered lost or disused faculties, and who are new men, whose hearts are full of praise to God.—The world will never perceive that Christianity is of heaven simply because its preachers are eloquent, or because its professors are highly ceremonious in their religious observances.—When the world sees that neighbourhoods are cleansed, illuminated, elevated altogether in moral tone, the world will begin to perceive that the work is wrought of God.

"... *a faithful man, and feared God above many.*"—NEH. vii. 2.

The wall was now built, and certain appointments had been made.—There are men who can accept appointments after the wall is completed who could

take but little part in the building of the wall itself.—Nehemiah had a discerning eye; he saw what men were fit for and what they could best do.—The selections of Nehemiah were not of an intellectual kind: the men whom he chose were not selected because they were brilliant in genius, cultivated in intellect, dainty in taste; they were chosen on moral grounds—"He was a faithful man, and feared God above many."—Always be sure about the moral substratum of character; that will abide when all things fail; the blossom may die, but the root abides in the earth, and out of it will come still larger and more beautiful blossoms—Distrust a man who has no conscience, no moral aspirations, no moral sensitiveness; he is a bad man, how great soever he may be in intellect and in accidental surroundings, and he will be as a broken staff in the day of weariness. There is a pre-eminence of goodness,—"And feared God above many;" loved God, consulted God, lived with God, longed after God with tender solicitude.—Abraham was the friend of God; Enoch walked with God; with Saul there was a band of men whose hearts God had touched.—We are nothing if we have not God; if we have God we are mightier than all the powers that can be against us.

"I found a register of the genealogy of them which came up at the first." —NEH. vii. 5.

There is more written than we suppose.—There are registers that are hidden away but will one day be produced.—When those registers are before us it will be found that the first may be last, and the last may be first.—God is the scribe, and nothing escapes his pen.—There are in heaven books, and a Book; there is another book, which is the Book of Life.—The universe is kept in regular order; it is founded on what we may term a systematic basis; every worker's name is entered, the period of service is indicated, the wages agreed upon are stated; nothing is left to disorder or to be settled without distinct and all-inclusive law:—"Rejoice not that the spirits are subject unto you, but rather rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Of what account is it that a man shall be found in all the records of society if he be not written in the book of heaven? There are those who boast of their descent from illustrious sires: blessed be God, there is not one of us who cannot be adopted into the heavenly family and make an heir of glory.—Not what our forefathers were, but what we ourselves may become through the grace of Christ, is the supreme question of the future.—All other books will be burned, or they shall be held to be of no account in the day of the great assize; but they who are written in the book of life shall have a right to enter into the city, and to be enfranchised amongst the angels and the spirits of the blessed.—Poorest, weakest man, thou mayest this very day be written in God's register.—The register is kept at the Cross, the signatures are all inscribed in blood; no man can write his own name there, but God will write it for him, if the man will only cry from his heart—God be merciful to me a sinner!

"These sought their register among those that were reckoned by genealogy, but it was not found."—NEH. vii. 64.

This is the humiliating side of life.—Men take it for granted that their names cannot have been omitted from any list of the great and noble, the princely, and the honoured; and, lo, when search comes to be made the

persons who have been living in self-confidence find to their discomfiture that they are not known in the household of the elect.—There should be no neglect about this business of spiritual registration.—In God's book registration is only made on account of individual prayer, and faith, and love.—We are not in God's register because of what our parents have been or not been.—There is no hereditary piety.—God does not keep a House of Peers into which men are born.—Every man is born again, and is adopted into the family of God.—Each Christian is a distinct miracle of heaven.

NEHEMIAH.

(Selected).

All that we know certainly concerning this eminent man is contained in the book which bears his name. His autobiography first finds him at Shushan [Ecbatana was the summer, Babylon the spring, and Persepolis the autumn residence of the kings of Persia. Susa was the principal palace], the winter residence of the kings of Persia, in high office as the cupbearer of King Artaxerxes Longimanus. The following note, summing up the achievements of this great and good governor, is from SMITH'S *Dictionary of the Bible*, from which work we have selected the notes on pages 227 and 235.

Nehemiah firmly repressed the exactions of the nobles and the usury of the rich, and rescued the poor Jews from spoliation and slavery. He refused to receive his lawful allowance as governor from the people, in consideration of their poverty, during the whole twelve years that he was in office, but kept at his own charge a table for one hundred and fifty Jews, at which any who returned from captivity were welcome. He made most careful provision for the maintenance of the ministering priests and Levites, and for the due and constant celebration of Divine worship. He insisted upon the sanctity of the precincts of the Temple being preserved inviolable, and peremptorily ejected the powerful Tobias from one of the chambers which Eliashib had assigned to him. He then replaced the stores and vessels which had been removed to make room for him, and appointed proper Levitical officers to superintend and distribute them. With no less firmness and impartiality he expelled from all sacred functions those of the high priest's family who had contracted heathen marriages, and rebuked and punished those of the common people who had likewise intermarried with foreigners; and lastly, he provided for keeping holy the Sabbath day, which was shamefully profaned by many, both Jews and foreign merchants, and by his resolute conduct succeeded in repressing the lawless traffic on the day of rest.

Beyond the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes, to which Nehemiah's own narrative leads us, we have no account of him whatever. Neither had Josephus. For when he tells us that "when Nehemiah had done many other excellent things . . . he came to a great age and then died," he sufficiently indicates that he knew nothing more about him. The most probable inference from the close of his own memoir, and the absence of any further tradition concerning him is, that he returned to Persia and died there.

THE BOOK OF ESTHER.

THE Book of Esther is entitled by the Jews *megillath Esther*, "the volume of Esther," or simply *megillah*, "the volume." The Greek translation dropped the term *megillah*, and retained only "Esther," which thus became the ordinary title among Christians. Concerning the date of the composition there is much controversy. But assuming Ahasuerus and Xerxes to be the same, which is now generally allowed, the date can be at once fixed. Ahasuerus makes the great feast in the third year of his reign (i. 3), Esther is taken into the royal palace in the seventh year (ii. 16), they cast lots before Haman in the twelfth year (iii. 7), and in the thirteenth year the plan of destruction is broached. The reign of Xerxes lasted from 485–464 B.C., therefore the events recorded in Esther range from 483–470 B.C.

Biblical authorities are much divided in opinion as to who is the author of the book. Some argue that it was written by Mordecai, from the minute details given of the great banquet, of the names of the chamberlains and eunuchs, and Haman's wife and sons, and of the customs and regulations of the palace, which betoken that the author lived at Shushan, and probably at court; while his no less intimate acquaintance with the most private affairs of both Esther and Mordecai well suits the hypothesis of the latter being himself the writer. It has, however, been ascribed to Ezra, and to the high priest Joiakim. A Jewish tradition makes it the work of "the men of the

synagogue"; while some suppose that it is an extract from the records of Persia. The Asiatic sovereigns, it is well known, caused annals of their reigns to be kept. Numerous passages in the Books of Kings and Chronicles prove that the kings of Israel and Judah had such annals. And this book attests that Ahasuerus had similar historical records (ii. 23; vi. 1); from which it appears probable that this history of the Jews under Queen Esther might be derived (x. 2).

In support of the view that Esther was written by Mordecai in Persia, it is noticed that the name of God in every form is entirely absent from the book, that there is no allusion whatever to the Jewish nation as one exiled from the land of their fathers, to that land itself, or to the newly rebuilt Temple, or, in fact, to any Jewish institution whatsoever. Whether the reserve is to be explained by the writer's long residence in Persia having blunted the edge of his national feelings, or whether he may have thought it safer to keep his feelings and opinions in the background, it is impossible to say: very possibly both causes may have acted. But though the name of God is not found in the book, his hand is plainly seen anticipating threatened evil, defeating and overruling it to the greater good of the Jews and even of the heathen (i., ii., iv.–x.). Notwithstanding all this, the best commentators admit the question to be one of great uncertainty, and of all the guesses put forward the authorship of Mordecai is considered the most probable, or at least possible, and this is the most that can be said.

There can beno doubt as to the canonicity of the book, although even to that some objections have been raised. Ithas been universally acknowledged by the Jews, and placed by some of them in an exceptional position of honour. The saying is attributed to Maimonides, that "in the days of the Messiah the prophetical books and the Hagiographa will be done away with, excepting only

Esther, which will endure together with the Pentateuch." To this day the Book of Esther is read through by the Jews in their synagogues at the Feast of Purim, while it was, and is still, in some synagogues, the custom at the mention of Haman's name to hiss, and stamp, and clench the fist, and cry, "Let his name be blotted out, may the name of the wicked rot!" It is said also that the names of Haman's ten sons are read in one breath, to signify that they all expired at the same instant of time. Some modern commentators, both English and German, have objected to the contents of the book as improbable; but if it be true, as Diodorus Siculus relates, that Xerxes put the Medians foremost at Thermopylæ on purpose that they might be all killed, because he thought they were not thoroughly reconciled to the loss of their national supremacy, it is surely not incredible that he should have given permission to Haman to destroy a few thousand strange people like the Jews, who were represented to be injurious to his empire, and disobedient to his laws. Nor again, when we remember what Herodotus relates of Xerxes in respect to promises made at banquets, can we deem it incredible that he should perform his promise to Esther to reverse the decree in the only way that seemed practicable. It is likely, too, that the secret friends and adherents of Haman would be the persons to attack the Jews, which would be a reason why Ahasuerus would rather rejoice at their destruction. In all other respects the writer shows such an accurate acquaintance with Persian manners, and is so true to history and chronology, as to afford the strongest internal evidences to the truth of the book.

The contents of the Book of Esther may thus be briefly summarised: It relates the royal feast of Ahasuerus, and the divorce of Vashti (chap. i.). The elevation of Esther to the Persian throne, and the service rendered to the king by Mordecai, in detecting a plot against his life (chap. ii.). The promotion of Haman, and his purposed

destruction of the Jews (chap. iii.). The consequent affliction of the Jews, and the measures taken by them (chap. iv.). The defeat of Haman's plot against Mordecai, through the instrumentality of Esther; the honour done to Mordecai; and the execution of Haman (chaps. v.–vii.). The defeat of Haman's general plot against the Jews; the institution of the Festival of Purim, in commemoration of this deliverance; and Mordecai's advancement (chaps. viii.–x.). The book shows how these Jews, though scattered among the heathen, were preserved, even when doomed by others to destruction. "The whole narrative of Esther is striking and graphic. The writer loves to dwell on details, and sometimes by numerous and careful touches produces an effect like that of a finished picture. He excels in the dramatic exhibition of character, Ahasuerus, Haman, Esther, and Mordecai being vividly portrayed by their words and acts, without any formal description. The style in which he writes is 'remarkably chaste and simple;' the constructions are mostly easy; and the sentences clear and unambiguous. The vocabulary, on the contrary, is, as might have been expected, not altogether pure, a certain number of Persian words being employed, and also a few terms characteristic of the later Hebrew or 'Chaldee' dialect."—*The Speaker's Commentary*, to which, with Bishop Ellicott's *Commentary*, Angus's *Bible Handbook*, and Smith's *Dictionary of the Bible*, I am indebted for the foregoing.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, we come to thee for all we need, but first we come to praise thee for all we have received. We stand in thy goodness, and to thy mercy we owe our life; we are spared criminals. We have done the things we ought not to have done: every one of thy Ten Words we have turned into a sin against thee. Thou didst set before us an open way, and we have stained it and corrupted it from beginning to end, and have rebelled against thee with stoutness of heart. Yet all the while we have taken things out of thy hand, for we are dependent upon thee, and we have nothing that we have not received. We are well aware of our ingratitude, yet it presses upon us as if by cruel necessity; even whilst we repent of it we repeat it, whilst we know how horrible a thing it is we go back to it as if we found some joy in grieving God: we cannot stand upright, we cannot go straightforwardly, we have no command over our feet, our hands, our eyes,—yea, our tongue befools us, and every sense we have makes a victim of us day by day. Yet still we would live, and we would be men, and we would not descend into beasthood; we would accept the lot into which thou hast sent us, and work out all its obligations with patience and hopefulness. But on how critical a ground we stand: the ground gives way under our feet, and we are threatened with eternal loss; all things are to-day against us, and to-morrow they combine on our behalf as if the whole universe were on our side as a hired ally. Amid such mysteries we live and work and wonder and pray; what if sometimes we should be intoxicated with delights that drive us towards madness, and sometimes be depressed with melancholy that threatens to deepen into despair? Our life is filled with variety: now it is a great storm, and now a calm sabbatic day. Hast thou not provided for all these changes? Does anything happen which thine eyes have not foreseen? Behold, our delight is to believe that God knows everything, has arranged everything, and is working out of our life, though so confused and disorderly, a purpose beautiful in architecture, temple-like, a thing that is yet to be a sanctuary in which we shall worship God, and commune with him evermore. How poor we are, how full of vanity and folly; how our conceit runs away with us, and mocks us, and scatters what little strength we have: how easily is the eye dulled, how soon do we succumb to the fascination of the senses;—then how proud of heart, how conscious of self-righteousness, how vain of our little morality; what pedants in respectability; how we boast the fineness of our garments and forget the rottenness of our hearts! God be merciful unto us sinners! Give us a right view of ourselves, as thou dost see us; then shall we know the meaning of the cross, and flee to it as the one remedy for the disease which

slays us. Blessed cross, holy cross, all-sufficient cross: on it is crucified the Son of man, from it ascends the Son of God. Would that we might live in its Spirit, acquire all things by its mastery, and endure all things according to the submissiveness which it represents. We bless thee for what thou hast done for us—many things, all things, things that are great and things that are small; behold the minutest work of life is the work of thy fingers, and when our life rises towards grandeur, behold it is thy hand that supplies the majesty. Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power; yea, riches, majesty, dominion, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever! May we live in our higher faculties, and walk along the noblest levels of thought, contemplation, worship, and service, so that when we come to die we may know nothing of death, and walk from the wilderness into the paradise. Amen.

Chapter i.

1. Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus (this is Ahasuerus which reigned from India even unto Ethiopia [Ethiopia paid tribute to Xerxes, or Ahasuerus], over an hundred and seven and twenty provinces:)

2. That in those days, when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan [the general abode of the Persian kings] the palace,

3. In the third year of his reign [483 B.C.], he made a feast [a successful campaign had just been finished in Egypt] unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles [the *first* like *protos* in Greek, and *primus* in Latin] and princes of the provinces being before him:

4. When he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty many days, even an hundred and fourscore days [half a year].

5. And when these days were expired, the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both unto great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace:

6. Where were white, green, and blue hangings, fastened with cords of fine [white] linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the beds [couches] were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and blue [not names of colours, but of actual stones], and white, and black marble.

7. And they gave them drink in vessels of gold (the vessels being diverse one from another), and royal wine [wine of Helbon, Ezek. xxvii. 18] in abundance, according to the state [hand] of the king.

8. And the drinking was according to the law; none did compel: for so the king had appointed to all the officers of his house, that they should do according to every man's pleasure.

9. Also Vashti [beautiful] the queen made a feast for the [omit "the"] women in the royal house which belonged to the king Ahasuerus.

10. ¶ On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, and Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven chamberlains [eunuchs] that served in the presence of Ahasuerus the king,

11. To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal [a tall cap decked with gems, and with a linen fillet of blue and white, called the *diadem*], to show the people and the princes her beauty: for she was fair to look on.

12. But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by his chamberlains: therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him.

13. ¶ Then the king said to the wise men, which knew the times [the precedents], (for so was the king's manner toward all that knew law and judgment:

14. And the next unto him was Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes [the seven counsellors of Ezra. vii. 14] of Persia and Media, which saw the king's face, and which sat the first in the kingdom:)

15. What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law, because she hath not performed the commandment of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?

16. And Memucan answered before the king and the princes, Vashti the queen hath not done wrong [dealt unfairly] to the king only, but also to all the princes, and to all the people that are in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus.

17. For this deed of the queen shall come abroad unto all women, so that they shall despise their husbands in their eyes, when it shall be reported, The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not.

18. Likewise shall the ladies of Persia and Media say this day unto all the king's princes, which have heard of the deed of the queen. Thus shall there arise too much contempt and wrath.

19. If it please the king, let there go a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered [that it pass not away], That Vashti come no more before king Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she.

20. And when the king's decree which he shall make shall be published throughout all his empire (for it is great), all the wives shall give to their husbands honour, both to great and small.

21. And the saying pleased the king and the princes; and the king did according to the word of Memucan:

22. For he sent letters [the Persian empire was the first to possess a postal system] into all the king's provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that it should be published according to the language of every people [*lit.* be ruling in his own house, and speaking according to the language of his own people].

THE OPENING.

IT is important to remember that there are three men mentioned in the old Testament under the name of Ahasuerus. If we forget this fact we shall now and then be in confusion as to certain ancient policies. The Ahasuerus mentioned in this chapter is supposed to be Xerxes, a man who ascended the throne 485 B.C.* Twenty years afterwards he was murdered by two of his own officers. He had everything that heart could wish—his eyes stood out with fatness—yet his life was marked by dissipation and debauchery of an extreme degree He shows us just what man would be if he had everything he could desire, and if he were unrestrained by moral considerations This Xerxes had been flushed with his success in Egypt, his cheeks were red with glory, his eyes were ablaze with self-complacency. He was just meditating an invasion of Greece, and therefore he would have a feast worthy of the greatest of kings. He did not hesitate indeed to call himself king of kings. So here we have a feast extending over a hundred and eighty days, and more —half a year's eating and drinking, night and day. Let us see what happened under such circumstances. What could be better, what could be more conducive to real joy, to boisterous gladness, than a hundred and eighty days at the banqueting-table?

But first let us look at the external pomp of the occasion, and mark its vanity:—he showed the nobles and princes of the provinces "the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty," and the whole display took place in the grandest of palaces,—"Where were white, green, and blue hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the beds were of gold and silver,

* Rawlinson says: "The name Ahasuerus is undoubtedly the proper Hebrew equivalent for the Persian word which the Greeks represented by Xerxes, . . . and we are at once struck with the strong resemblance which his character bears to that assigned by the classical writers to the celebrated son of Darius. Proud, self-willed, amorous, careless of contravening Persian customs; reckless of human life, yet not actually bloodthirsty; impetuous, facile, changeable, the Ahasuerus of Esther corresponds in all respects to the Greek portraiture of Xerxes, which is not the mere picture of an Oriental despot, but has various peculiarities which distinguish it even from the other Persian kings."

upon a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black, marble. And they gave them drink in vessels of gold, (the vessels being diverse one from another [no two vessels alike, so that sometimes the drinkers did not know which to praise the more, the drink or the goblet]) and royal wine in abundance, according to the state [that is, the estate, royalty, and splendour] of the king." Sometimes we say, looking upon the abodes of poverty, What can we expect here of decency, moral education, and progress? See how the poor are huddled and crowded together, what can be looked for here but a hotbed bringing forth a most evil harvest? All that is right. Not a word in the speech would we change. But if there is any argument in it at all it is an argument that covers a large space. Here is a man who has room enough, he has everything at his command; if he wants gold or silver or precious stones, he can have them by a nod of his head: what can we expect here but piety, thankfulness, contentment, moral progress? Family life under such a canopy must be a daily doxology, a sweet hallowed thing more of heaven than of earth. This would be a fair application of the first argument, if there is anything in that first argument at all.

Observe the vanity of the royal external condition. There was nothing else to live for. Here is a man who lived for time and sense: a new goblet was a delight, another horse was another kingdom; he had no vision beyond for which he cared; what heaven he had was in theory; we read nothing of his morals, his conduct, his spiritual inspiration; he is wrapped round and round with an infinite bandage of inventory. If it had not been so history would have been lacking in one important lesson. We should have said, Give a man enough of this world, and you will find him almost a god. There have been men here and there who have had the world thrust upon them, and the only element that was wanting under all the burden of their riches was the element of godliness. It is difficult to carry heaven in one hand and the earth in the other: "Ye cannot serve God and mammon." Yet men do not believe these stories of Ahasuerus and of Solomon. If they did, their whole course of life would be altered; their domestic expenses would be reduced to a minimum. But the whole struggle of modern life is exactly after the

first chapter of the Book of Esther and the first chapter of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Every Ahasuerus thinks he could do better than his namesake, and every new Solomon says that he would never play the fool as the old one did. What little toy-houses are ours as compared with this palace; and yet we will persist. Why do we not believe history? Why do we not accept the verdict that it is not in time or sense, in gold or precious stones, to make a man great or happy, to make him wise or bless him with the infinite fortune of contentment? When we have built up our little toy places, Ahasuerus looks down upon them, and smiles at the little honeycombs. His "beds were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black, marble." All these names are not colours; they are substances, they are jewels, they are precious works; there was not a single inch upon which a finger-tip could be laid that was not made the most of by artistic skill. Yet it was an elaborate tomb, a magnificent sarcophagus! Still, how we spin and spin, and toil and imagine, and dream, and get things together, and when it is all done our little snowball of success is looked down upon by the Jungfraus and Mont Blancs with unutterable disdain. When will men come to learn that a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth; that he is most jewelled who has no jewellery; that he only is great who is great in soul? Never will the world learn that lesson, would be the verdict if the judges limited their inferences to immediate fact and experience. The purpose of the cross of Christ was to destroy all these little jewel-caskets, and all these toy inventions, and to bring men to feel that the body itself is a burden, and is only to be tolerated as necessary to the cultivation and development of the soul.

See what even kings are when morally uneducated and unrestrained! A man who sleeps on a bed of gold must wake up to do good. So one would think. The reasoning seems to be solid and transparent. He who spends a night under a canopy of silver, and opens his eyes upon all things lovely, must hasten away to make all men as wise and happy as himself. It is not in the world to make heavenly minds. This is the necessity of the case. There is nothing in bread, or gold, or fine raiment, or pomp, or vanity, that can touch the soul. But this lesson the

poor moralist may urge for ever, and he will only be plying the drowsy attention of reluctant ears. We still think that the philosopher's stone will be found to-morrow. That streak of superstition runs through the devoutest minds. We go down to the market-place to bring back what the market-place never sold; we say to one another, Good-bye, until eventide, and from market-place, exchange, emporium, I will bring back a divine benediction; and when we bring back the reticule that was to have contained the prize, behold it is an empty basket. Yet man grows no wiser! The moment Sunday passes away like a ghost, a wraith of time on which man would never willingly gaze, he seizes Monday as it were by the throat and says, Give me peace, contentment, rest; and the poor day says, It is not in my keeping—not in time, but in eternity must immortal men find safe footing and perfect calm.

We must beware of the sophism in both sides of a very popular argument, namely, that if men had enough they would be good, and because men have not enough what can they be but bad. Character is not in circumstances. The poorest people have, in no solitary instances easily numbered, most vividly illustrated the purest and noblest character. There are kings who are paupers; there are paupers who are kings. How long should the moralist preach this truth? He will preach it many a year in the wilderness, and his best hearers will go immediately after his voice has ceased and buy another rim of gold. We owe everything to moral education—we owe nothing to kingly splendour. If any king has ever done anything for the world, he did it because he was a good man, not merely because he was a titular king. Every known moral gift is consecrated to the lower faculties; how to make the body stronger, fairer, is the great question of the sensualist. Paint it; take grey-haired nature and steep her in the dye-tub, and make her young with colour! Is this the speech of immortal man, divinest creature of God? Yes, it comes to that, if we have nothing but gold, and marble, and paint, and palace, and crown. How can we expect a road to end in two opposite directions? This is precisely what men are doing who imagine that by travelling the road of great state and splendour they will come into heaven.

The road does not lie in that direction. Suppose you seek a city in the south, and I direct you upon a northern road, by what terms would you describe my direction and my spirit? Suppose I saw you walking south in order to get north, and never said a word about it, would you account me neighbourly, civil, friendly, just when by one word I could have put you on the right course? When I see a man mounting a horse with a view of riding to heaven, I feel bound to tell him that he is a fool, and will never get there. There is no bridle-path to heaven; it is a way of the cross, and self-immolation, and agonising prayer. No horse ever took a rider to heaven. Would you be great? Be great in soul.

Here is an opportunity for every man to be great—great in patience, in self-control, in charity, in magnanimity. A man is great because he takes great views of others, conceives liberal things for God and carries them out with both hands. So the poorest may be rich; the giver of mites may throw the giver of gold into contempt. What say we of working the miracles of goodness, of speaking to those who have no friends, of visiting the uttermost abodes of poverty and the lowest tenements of distress? All the miracles of goodness are yet to be done. Miracles of power have dazzled the vision of history,—now we may not show the glory, but we may disclose the goodness of God. Surely a palace will be a sanctuary. The palace of this man was worse than a stable. Surely in the presence of beauty men must grow beautiful? This man looked on beauty but did not see it, and perpetrated the irony of living amongst beautiful things until he became himself ghastly and hideous. How sad a thing when the house is greater than the tenant! How distressing a contradiction when the furniture is of greater value than the man who owns it! This was the case with the great Xerxes. No man had so many drinking-cups, no two guests had a cup of the same pattern; and as for the drinking of the royal wine, it was in abundance, the more it was drunk the more there seemed to be left to drink. Never did Pleasure hold such carnival; never were such Saturnalia known in all the earth. Yet the men did not retire from it heroes and chiefs of virtue and beneficence; they staggered away from it half beast, half devil.

Now we shall see some revelations of character. Notably we see how selfishness never considers the feelings of others. It occurred to the drunken king, when his heart "was merry with wine," to consult the seven chamberlains that waited always upon Persian monarchs. The seven chamberlains were the seven heads of seven houses; they constituted a kind of domestic cabinet always consulted by the king on critical, delicate, or difficult occasions. The king commanded the chamberlains "to bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to show the people and the princes her beauty" (v. 11). Did he send a message to Vashti to ask if she would be willing? When was woman ever honoured out of Christ, who redeemed her from her social estrangement and solitude, and set her forth invested with the queenliness of a God-given beauty and modesty? Hear the king—Fetch Vashti now, and make a show of her beauty, for she is fair to look upon. All this is in natural order. Selfishness never considers the feeling of others. Selfishness will be gratified at all costs and hazards. When a man's heart is merry with wine, all that is most sacred in humanity goes out of him. Still the king is in search of jewels, he will now have a living diamond; he dashed his goblet to the earth and said, That is a dead thing—fetch the living goblet, and let us drink blood, and feast our eyes upon throbbing beauty! Who can withhold anything from a ravenous beast? Who should stay his power, and say, Be quiet, be self-controlled, be contented? None. This is human nature when it is left to itself. Because we cannot do these things we must not reason that therefore they cannot be done. History is useful in so far as it sets before us what has actually been done by man. The king said, My wife is as my horse, my slave, my dog; if I order wife, or dog, or slave, or horse to stand before me, who should say me nay? Yet who can control the working of the Spirit of God? It may be that Vashti for the first time in her life will resist. We do not always know why we resist, why we commence new courses and policies of life; we are oftentimes a surprise to ourselves; we never could have believed that we could have been found in such and such relations, or uttering such and such words and vows. The heart of man is in the hand of the Lord. We can explain next to nothing.

We read in the twelfth verse that Vashti turned the whole occasion to new meanings.

"But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by his chamberlains" (v. 12).

She too had a feast "for the women in the royal house which belonged to king Ahasuerus." Was there any wine there? Not that we read of. Was the Persian law at all like the Roman law? for the Roman senate decreed that no woman should drink wine. Was this feast of Vashti's a sober feast—a feast fit for women? If so, her reason may have grown in strength and clearness, and her will in genuine moral dignity. Who knows what was said at the feast? An infamous old rabbin, whose bones ought to be exhumed and burned by the common hangman, said that speech descended in ten measures, and that woman ran away with nine of them. He was a rabbin! We cannot tell what is being plotted in other houses. When we feast ourselves we do not take in the whole situation: there is life below stairs, life on the other side of the street, life that makes no noise but that schemes well, and that has patience to complete the powder circuit before applying the fusee. Vashti said, No, I will not come, I will not be made a show of. "Therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him"—literally, he frothed at the mouth, and became as a wild boar. The strength of manhood is in self-control. The Oriental king very soon became intolerably hot. He had a trick of anger. He could not brook that his will should be resisted. It is the very highest attainment of Christian education that a man shall accept the resistance of his will as an element in his culture: no man will seek to force his will; he will reason about it, he will be mighty in argument, tender and gentle in persuasion, and if he cannot win the first day or the second day he may be successful on the third day. But mere force never won a true victory. There may have been almost annihilation on the opposite side, but where there is one little spark left, that little spark hopes that it will become one day an avenging conflagration. Conquer by love, and you will reign by consent. Let men feel that your wisdom is greater than theirs, and they will say, God save the king! The time will come when every man will have to prove

his kingliness, not because of the insignia that he keeps in the tower, but because of a wise head, a noble heart, and a hand that never refused its offices to an honest cause.

The chamberlains were as much overturned in their calculations as was the king. The question was—

"What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law, because she hath not performed the commandment of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?" (v. 15).

What shall be done with the opposing party? What shall be done with the impracticable element? What shall be done with novelty of conduct? And the seven chamberlains began to reason, saying,—

"For this deed of the queen shall come abroad unto all women, so that they shall despise their husbands in their eyes, when it shall be reported, The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not. Likewise shall the ladies of Persia and Media say this day unto all the king's princes, which have heard of the deed of the queen. Thus shall there arise too much contempt and wrath" (vv. 17, 18).

It is an instructive sight to see statesmen and others puzzled over these social problems. What shall be done with the enemy? Lock him up! What shall be done with Vashti? Cut off her head! But will that end the matter? No, it will only begin it. Beheading is an excellent way of propagating truth. The martyrs have made Christian assembly in public and in daylight possible and agreeable. But said the advisers—

"If it please the king, let there go a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered, That Vashti come no more before king Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she" (v. 19).

Well, said Ahasuerus, perhaps that is the best that can be done: let us have Home Rule: send the letters out at once, "to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house." "Every man"—what a perversion of language! "Bear rule,"—what is "rule?" audacity, effrontery, tyranny? "In his own house"—who has a house of his own? Let us hope that no man is "in his own house:" the house is a prison until somebody else divides it, shares it. Husband, the

house is not your own—except upon rent-day; then you can have it all. Wife, the house is not your own—but the most of it is; it would be a poor, poor house if you were to turn your back upon it. The house belongs to all the people that are in it—part to the husband, part to the wife, part to the children, part to the servants, right through all the household line. Develop the notion of partnery, co-responsibility: let every one feel a living interest in the place: then the house shall be built of living stones, pillared with righteousness, roofed with love. It is here that Christianity shines out with unique lustre. Obedience is right for all parties, but the obedience is to be in the Lord, it is to be the obedience of righteousness, a concession to wisdom, a toll paid to honour, which is to be returned in love and gratitude. Christianity has made our houses homes. We owe everything that is socially beneficent to Christianity. O Jesus, Man of Bethlehem, who didst make every house radiant with morning light, dwell in our little house, break our bread, inspire our domestic economy; we want to be thy guests: let the house be ours only because it is thine!

Chapter ii.

1. After these things, when the wrath of King Ahasuerus was appeased, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her.

2. Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, Let there be fair young virgins sought for the king:

3. And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the fair young virgins unto Shushan the palace, to the house of the women [the harem, always a prominent feature in the establishment of an eastern king], unto the custody of Hege [called Hegai in verse 8] the king's chamberlain, keeper of the women; and let their things for purification be given them:

4. And let the maiden which pleaseth the king be queen instead of Vashti. And the thing pleased the king; and he did so.

5. ¶ Now in Shushan the palace there was a certain Jew, whose name was Mordecai [supposed to be a powerful eunuch in the days of Xerxes], the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite [the names of the actual father, grandfather, and great-grandfather of Mordecai];

6. Who [Kish, not Mordecai] had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captivity which had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away [598 B.C.].

7. And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther [a Persian name meaning a star], his uncle's daughter: for she had neither father nor mother, and the maid was fair and beautiful: whom Mordecai, when her father and mother were dead, took for his own daughter.

8. ¶ So it came to pass, when the king's commandment and his decree was heard, and when many maidens were gathered together unto Shushan the palace, to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was brought also unto the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women.

9. And the maiden pleased him, and she obtained kindness of him [same phrase in verse 17]; and he speedily gave her her things for purification, with such things as belonged to her, and seven maidens, which were meet to be given her, out of the king's house: and he preferred her and her maids unto the best place of the house of the women.

10. Esther had not showed her people nor her kindred: for Mordecai had charged her that she should not shew it [hoping that she might pass for a native of Persia].

11. And Mordecai walked every day before the court of the women's house [as one of the royal doorkeepers], to know how Esther did, and what should become of her.

12. ¶ Now when every maid's turn was come to go in to king Ahasuerus, after that she had been twelve months, according to the manner [law or ordinance] of the women, (for so were the days of their purifications accomplished, to wit, six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with sweet odours, and with other things for the purifying of the women;)

13. Then thus came every maiden unto the king; whatsoever she desired was given her to go with her out of the house of the women unto the king's house.

14. In the evening she went, and on the morrow she returned into the second house of the women, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's chamberlain, which kept the concubines: she came in unto the king no more, except the king delighted in her, and that she were called by name.

15. ¶ Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail, the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her for his daughter, was come to go in unto the king, she required nothing but what Hegai, the king's chamberlain, the keeper of the women, appointed. And Esther obtained favour in the sight of all them that looked upon her.

16. So Esther was taken unto king Ahasuerus into his house royal in the tenth month, which is the month Tebeth [extending from the new moon in January to that in February], in the seventh year of his reign [478 B.C.].

17. And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti.

18. Then the king made a great feast unto all his princes and his servants, even Esther's feast; and he made a release [rest] to the provinces, and gave gifts, according to the state of the king.

19. And when the virgins were gathered together the second time, then Mordecai sat [was sitting] in the king's gate.

20. Esther had not yet showed her kindred nor her people; as Mordecai had charged her: for Esther did the commandment of Mordecai, like as when she was brought up with him. [This verse is parenthetical.]

21. ¶ In those days, while Mordecai sat in the king's gate, two of the king's chamberlains, Bigthan and Teresh, of those which kept the door, were wroth, and sought to lay hand on the king Ahasuerus. [He was ultimately murdered by a captain of the guard and a *chamberlain*.]

22. And the thing was known to Mordecai, who told it unto Esther the queen; and Esther certified the king thereof in Mordecai's name.

23. And when inquisition was made of the matter, it was found out; therefore they were both hanged [crucified] on a tree: and it was written in the book of the chronicles before the king.

Chapter iii.

1. After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman [of whom nothing is known beyond what is in this book] the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him.

2. And all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed, and reverenced Haman: for the king had so commanded concerning him. But

Mordecai bowed not [did not prostrate himself], nor did him reverence. [Mordecai's objection was religious, not personal or ceremonial.]

3. Then the king's servants, which were in the king's gate, said unto Mordecai, Why transgressest thou the king's commandment?

4. Now it came to pass, when they spake daily unto him, and he hearkened not unto them, that they told Haman, to see whether Mordecai's matters [words] would stand: for he had told them that he was a Jew.

5. And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath.

6. And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had showed him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai.

7. ¶ In the first month, that is, the month Nisan, in the twelfth year [474 B.C.] of king Ahasuerus, they cast pur [a Persian word for lot], that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar [the lunar month ending at the new moon in March].

8. ¶ And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws [a favourite weapon in the hands of persecutors]; therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them.

9. If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver [two and a half millions sterling, the whole annual revenue of the empire] to the hands of those that have the charge of the business, to bring it into the king's treasuries.

10. And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jew's enemy.

11. And the king said [with characteristic indifference] unto Haman, The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee.

12. Then were the king's scribes called on the thirteenth day [the eve of the passover, on the same date, five hundred years after, Christ was betrayed!] of the first month, and there was written according to all that Haman had commanded unto the king's lieutenants [satraps], and to the governors that were over every province, and to the rulers of every people of every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language; in the name of king Ahasuerus was it written, and sealed with the king's ring.

13. And the letters were sent by posts [the runners] into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to take the spoil of them for a prey.

14. The copy of the writing for a commandment to be given in every province was published unto all people, that they should be ready against that day.

15. The posts went out, being hastened by the king's commandment, and

the decree was given in Shushan the palace. And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed [evidently preferring the Jews to Haman].

Chapter iv.

1. When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes [a common sign of Oriental sorrow], and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and bitter cry;

2. And came even before the king's gate: for none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth.

3. And in every province, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

4. So Esther's maids and her chamberlains came and told it her. Then was the queen exceedingly grieved; and she sent raiment to clothe Mordecai, and to take away his sackcloth from him; but he received it not.

5. Then called Esther for Hatach, one of the king's chamberlains, whom he had appointed to attend upon her, and gave him a commandment to Mordecai, to know what it was, and why it was.

6. So Hatach went forth to Mordecai unto the street [the square, or wide open place] of the city, which was before the king's gate.

7. And Mordecai told him of all that had happened unto him, and of the sum of the money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the Jews, to destroy them.

8. Also he gave him the [a] copy of the writing of the decree that was given at Shushan to destroy them, to shew it unto Esther, and to declare it unto her, and to charge her that she should go in unto the king, to make supplication unto him, and to make request before him for her people.

9. And Hatach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai.

10. ¶ Again [*and* is better] Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto Mordecai;

11. All the king's servants [court], and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his [one unvarying rule] to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre [a custom referred to by this writer only], that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.

12. And they told to Mordecai Esther's words.

13. Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself [imagine not in thy mind] that thou shalt escape in the king's house [occupation of the palace will be no protection to thee], more than all the Jews.

14. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement [a breathing space] and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place [heavenly interposition]; but thou and thy father's house

[Esther was not Abihail's only child] shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

15. ¶ Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer,

16. Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day [probably thirty-six hours]: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.

17. So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

PROGRESS.

IN course of time Esther succeeded Vashti as queen. Some have blamed Mordecai for not returning with his people, for lingering in the strange land when he might have gone home. But who can tell what he is doing? How foolish is criticism upon human action! We think we have great liberty, and we have a marvellous way of blinding ourselves to the tether which binds us to a centre. We want to do things and cannot; we say we will arise and depart, and behold we cannot gather ourselves together or stand up. Some event occurs which entirely alters our whole purpose. We long to be at home, and yet we cannot begin the journey thitherward. Men should stand still and think about this, because in it is the whole mystery of Divine Providence. We cannot account for ourselves. There are those who challenge us to state our reasons for pursuing such and such a course of action; when we come to write down our reasons we have nothing to write. Do not scatter blame too freely. If life comes easily to you, so that you can manage it with the right hand and with the left, without any anxiety or difficulty, be quite sure that you are living a very poor life. Do not boast of your flippancy. An easy life is an ill-regulated life. A life that can account for itself all the four-and-twenty hours, and all the days of the year, is a fool's life. Blessed are they who know the pain of mystery, who see before them an angel whom they cannot pass, who hear a voice behind them, saying, This is the way; walk ye in it: though it look so bare and hard and uphill, yet this is the way. Out of all this should come great religious consideration. We want to sit beside our friend, and cannot; we want to return to the old homestead, and no ship will carry us; we want to get rid of burdens, and in

endeavouring to throw off the weight we only increase it. All this is full of significance. We may look at it in one of two ways: either fretfully and resentfully, and thus may kick against the pricks, and find how hard it is to play that game of opposition against God; or we can accept the lot and say, "I am called to be here; I should like to have laboured in another land, but thou hast fixed me here; I should have loved to surround myself with other circumstances, but thou hast determined the bounds of my habitation: Lord, give me light enough to work in, give me patience in time of stress, and give me the strength of confidence."

The nationality was concealed; it was not known that Mordecai was a Jew, beyond a very limited circle, nor was it known that Esther belonged to the Jewish race. We say, How wrong! Who are we that we should use that word so freely? Who gave us any right or title to scatter that word so liberally? Even things that are purely human, so far as we can see them, have mysteries that ought to be recognised as regulating forces, as subduing and chastening all the actions of life. Why did not Mordecai declare his nationality? Who asks the question? Do you know what it is to be down-trodden, never to be understood, always to have ill-usage heaped upon you? Do you know what it is to be spat upon, taunted, reviled, loaded with ignominy? If so, you will be merciful and generous, because you will be just. Many a man is suffering to-day from misconstruction, who could explain everything if he cared to do so. Some men would be as courageous as the boldest of us if they had not been ill-treated in youth. You must go back to the antecedents if you would understand many things which now occasion perplexity and excite even distrust. If the boy has had no chance in life; if he has been hungered, starved in body, starved in mind, beaten by cruel hands, or turned away from by still more cruel neglect; if he has had no one to fight his little battles; if every time he lifted up his face he was smitten down,—what if he should turn out to be a man who fears to speak his mind, who hesitates long before he adopts a definite action and policy? Who are these brave people who would always be at the front? They are always at the front

when there is any fault-finding to be done, but never found there when any great sacrifice is to be completed. There may be explanations even of suspicious actions. Suspicion would vanish if knowledge were complete. Out of all this comes the sweet spirit of charity, saying, Be careful, be tender, be wise; judge not, that ye be not judged: with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. Many a man is more courageous than he appears to be, and there may yet come a time when he will prove his courage. It requires long years to forget first disappointments, early ill-usage, infantile neglect. Some are better at the end than they were at the beginning. Some men are good at a long race. Others are quicker at the start: they get on the road very speedily and ostentatiously, and the despised runner comes along labouringly, but he is an awkward man on a long race; he will wear the little flimsy creature down, and when he is asked a thousand miles away where his competitor is, he will say, I do not know. Some come to the full estate of their power almost at once—"soon ripe, soon rot." Others require long time, and they are younger at sixty than they were at thirty. We are not judges, blessed be God. Would heaven we could withhold the word of censure, and say, These men would be better if we knew them better; they are in quality as good as we are; they have not been growing in the same rich soil, but they may flourish when we are forgotten. Let us, then, see how the little story unfolds itself.

Here is a man advanced without any discoverable reason. His name is Haman, "the son of Hammedatha the Agagite"—an information which tells nothing, a pedigree which is a superfluity. But the king, whose character we have just studied a little, promoted him, advanced him; and whenever a man is advanced without reason he loses his head. A man must always be greater than his office. No honour we can confer upon him can move his equanimity or disturb his dignity, for whilst he is modest as virtue he is still conscious of a divinely-given power which keeps all office under his feet. A man arbitrarily set on the throne will fall off. Any one who is less than his office will be toppled over. Men must grow, and when they grow they will be modest; the growth is imperceptible. The grand old oak

knows nothing about its grandeur; it has been developing for centuries, and is unconscious of all admiration. Entitle yourselves to promotion and advancement by solid character, large knowledge, faithful industry, steady perseverance, by moral quality of every name and degree; then when you come to high office you will be modest, calm, thankful, generous. Haman went up to the second place without, so far as we can discover on the face of the record, right or reason.

"But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence" (iii. 2).

This was not little or pedantic on Mordecai's part; the reason is religious. Here is an act of Oriental prostration which means religious homage, and Mordecai knew but one God. He was not wanting in civility, he was faithful to religious conviction. Some men would bow down to a dog if they could increase their salary by so doing! Bowing down, they would say, costs nothing: why should we trouble ourselves about a sentimental act, a piece of etiquette and ceremony? we can get promotion by it, and the end will justify the means. Mordecai was in a strange country, but he was a Jew still. He was an honest believer in God. He knew well enough what Haman could do for him; he knew also what Haman could do against him: but he was of a fine quality of soul. He will talk presently, and then we shall know something about him. He is grand in silence, he is overwhelming in speech. He will not talk long, but he will talk fire. This was told to Haman, and the question was asked "whether Mordecai's matters would stand:" look at his record, track his footprints, set the bloodhounds upon him. He had told them that he was a Jew, and that probably was given as his reason; and the very reason he assigned was turned into a charge against him. It would appear as if, in stating that he was a Jew, he meant to explain why he did not throw himself down in the common prostration. Men often have their reasons turned like sharp swords against them; their very confidence is turned into an impeachment. He who lives with bad men must expect bad treatment. Haman then began to take notice of the Jew.

"And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath" (iii. 5).

Little natures require great revenge. Little natures endeavour to magnify themselves by exaggeration. Small statues require high pedestals. Haman will not lay hands upon Mordecai, he will lay hands upon the whole Jewish race, so far as that race can be discovered in the country, and he will kill every man, woman, and child. Was he a right man to be promoted and advanced? Elevation tests men. A little brief authority discovers what is in a man's heart. How many men are honest, and modest, and gentle, and gracious, until they become clothed with a little brief authority! They do not know themselves—what wonder if they forget themselves? Haman therefore resolved upon the extirpation of the Jews in his country—

"And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them. If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the hands of those that have the charge of the business, to bring it into the king's treasuries" (iii. 8, 9).

It is of no use being in office unless you do something. Have a bold policy—kill somebody! Be active!

"And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy. And the king said unto Haman, The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee" (iii. 10, 11).

This is the effect of self-indulgence on the human will. We have seen how the king lived. We cannot tell exactly what time passed between the action we have just studied and the action which is now before us, but probably a considerable period passed. The man's soul has gone down. You may ruin any man by luxury. Inflame his ambition, and he may seem to be a strong man; but ask him to do anything that is of the nature of resentment, and he will instantly succumb: his will had been destroyed. Xerxes said in effect to Haman, Do whatever thou pleasest: I hear the chink of silver in thy hand, thou hast promised tribute and support,—go and write any number of letters you like, and kill any number of men you please, but let me alone. Then came the dark day in history—that day all cloud, that day that had no morning, no noontide no hint of blue.

"When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry" (iv. i).

That is all we can do sometimes. Speech is useless, words are a mockery; the soul is filled with woe. It is not unmanly, it is not weakness; it is indeed an aspect of human greatness; it is man seeking after the ineffable, the eternal, the infinite,—crying where he cannot speak, for a cry is more eloquent than a sentence. All who have known the bitterness of life have been in this very condition in some degree. When poverty has been in every room in the house, when affliction is a familiar guest, when disappointment comes like a crown of thorns upon the head of every day, what if even strong solid men express themselves in a loud and bitter cry? Mordecai had, however, something left; he said, I must work through my relative; Esther the queen must come to my deliverance now, and through me to the deliverance of the whole people in this foreign land. So he began communications with the queen; the queen explained and hesitated, pointed out the difficulties, but Mordecai would hear nothing of difficulty. He made a grand appeal to her:

"Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed" (iv. 13, 14).

We have anticipated the speech. How nobly it is argued; how pathetically it is uttered! The man was shut up to one course. There are times when we are dependent upon one life: if this fail, God fails. Who does not know something of this experience, when ingenuity is baffled, when invention can go no farther, and yet there is just one thing that may be tried, that must be tried? These are the circumstances which test character; these are the circumstances, too, which test our friends. We only know our friends when we are in extremity. This is Christ's own test of character. He said, "I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat"; in other words, I was in extremity, and my extremity was your opportunity. This is precisely the reasoning of Mordecai. The Jews were an hungered, and they pined for the meat—the bread, the water, of fraternal sympathy. There are times when we must risk everything upon

a last effort. Are there not some of us who have risked nothing? In crises we know what men are. Mordecai's religious confidence triumphed. He was a Jew of the right type; he said enlargement and deliverance should arise from another quarter: God would not forsake his people; he has himself punished them, but in all God's correction there is measure: it is impossible that Haman's murderous policy can succeed. There are times when men leap in their inspiration; they become majestic through moral conviction, they feel that things are not handed over to a wicked hand. Though the night be dark, and the wind be loud and cold, and friends there may seem to be none, yet through that very darkness deliverance will come, and the world will be wrested from the clutches of the devil.

Then came the sublime personal appeal—

"And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (iv. 14).

Now we may have explanation. "We wondered why thou shouldest have been chosen to be queen in place of Vashti; others appeared to be more beautiful than thou, but by some means, not then explicable, thou wast brought to the kingdom: now the explanation is at hand." God discovers himself by surprises. For a long time all things proceed monotonously, even wearisomely, and quite suddenly we begin to put things together, and to shape them, until they become pillars, arches, houses, sanctuaries; then we say, This was the meaning of it all: the darkness is gone, the light shineth, and behold God, even invisibleness, is at hand, so that we can lay our hand upon him, fall down before him, and bless his all-sufficient and reverent name. This hope nerves the weakest; this hope reveals the depths of the human constitution. Are there not crises in which we are all placed? What have you your wealth for? What a trial is prosperity! Why was it given to you? That you might make every good cause prosper; that you might make every way easy along which the kingdom of heaven was passing; that there might be no crying in your streets. Your wealth was given to satisfy the cry of need, to bless the cause of honesty. How dare you go to bed with all that gold in the coffer? For what was your power given? not to gratify your ambition, not to make you a name

amongst men; but that you might threaten the enemy, undo heavy burdens, smite the tyrant, and speak comfortably to every brave man who is working under arduous and trying circumstances. Who dare bear his power simply as a decoration? For what was your education given to you? That you might be a light in darkness, a teacher of the ignorant, a friend to those who have had no such advantages as you have enjoyed. You were not educated that you might chatter in polysyllables, astound human ignorance by an information which it could never test; you were educated in the providence of God that you might help every man to learn the alphabet, to spell the name of God, to make out the gospel of Christ. "Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" If men had understanding of the times, saw their opportunities, rose to the occasion, in the spirit of Christ, in the spirit of the cross of Christ, they would make the world feel how true are Christ's words: "Ye are the salt of the earth. . . . Ye are the light of the world. . . . Ye are a city set on a hill." Christ Jesus the Son of God always calls men to help others, to deliver the oppressed, to undo heavy burdens that are too grievous to be borne. In going forward to such work as that we are obeying Christ's command when he said—"Follow me."

Chapter v.

1. Now it came to pass on the third day [of the fast] that Esther put on her royal apparel [put off her garb of woe, and put on her queenly robes], and stood in the inner court of the king's house, over against the king's house [in a magnificent Persian pillared hall]: and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house over against the gate of the house.

2. And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favour in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the sceptre.

3. Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request [the Orientals granted requests beforehand]? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom.

4. And Esther answered, If it seem good unto the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him.

5. Then the king said, Cause Haman to make haste, that he may do as Esther hath said. So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared.

6. ¶ And the king said unto Esther at the banquet of wine [the dessert], What is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed.

7. Then answered Esther, and said, My petition and my request is:

8. If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition, and to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them, and I will do to-morrow as the king hath said.

9. ¶ Then went Haman forth that day joyful and with a glad heart: but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he stood not up [needless rudeness], nor moved for him, he was full of indignation against Mordecai.

10. Nevertheless Haman refrained himself: and when he came home he sent and called for his friends, and Zeresh his wife.

11. And Haman told them of the glory of his riches, and the multitude of his children [he had ten sons, see ch. ix. 10], and all the things wherein the king had promoted him, and how he had advanced him above the princes and servants of the king.

12. Haman said moreover, Yea, Esther the queen did let no man come in with the king unto the banquet that she had prepared but myself; and to-morrow am I invited unto her also with the king.

13. Yet all this availeth me nothing [contenteth me not], so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.

14. ¶ Then said Zeresh his wife and all his friends unto him, Let a

gallows [tree] be made of fifty cubits high [seventy-five feet, probably a mistake in the number], and to-morrow speak thou unto the king that Mordecai may be hanged thereon: then go thou in merrily with the king unto the banquet. And the thing pleased Haman; and he caused the gallows to be made.

Chapter vi.

1. On that night could not the king sleep [the king's sleep fled away], and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king [the Persian kings were unable to read].

2. And it was found written, that Mordecai had told of Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's chamberlains, the keepers of the door, who sought to lay hand on the king Ahasuerus.

3. And the king said, What honour and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this? Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, There is nothing done for him.

4 ¶ And the king said, Who is in the court? [what high officer of state attends to-day?] Now Haman was come [early, according to Eastern custom] into the outward court of the king's house, to speak unto the king to hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him.

5. And the king's servants said unto him, Behold, Haman standeth in the court. And the king said, Let him come in.

6. So Haman came in. And the king said unto him, What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour [in whose honour the king delighteth]? Now Haman thought in his heart, To whom would the king delight to do honour more than to myself?

7. And Haman answered the king, For the man whom the king delighteth to honour,

8. Let the royal apparel be brought which the king useth to wear [to wear it without royal permission would have been a mortal offence], and the horse that the king rideth upon, and the crown royal which is set upon his head [the head of the horse]:

9. And let this apparel and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that they may array the man withal whom the king delighteth to honour, and bring him on horseback through the street of the city, and proclaim before him. Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honour.

10. Then the king said to Haman, Make haste [the honour has been too long delayed], and take the apparel and the horse, as thou hast said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew [stated to be such in the chronicles], that sitteth at the king's gate: let nothing fail of all that thou hast spoken.

11. Then took Haman the apparel and the horse, and arrayed Mordecai, and brought him on horseback through the street of the city, and proclaimed before him, Thus shall it be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour.

12. ¶ And Mordecai came again to the king's gate [after honour he returned to service]. But Haman hasted to his house mourning, and having his head covered.

13. And Haman told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that

had befallen him. Then said his wise men and Zeresh his wife unto him, If [oracular vanity] Mordecai be of the seed of the Jews, before whom thou hast begun to fall, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely [utterly] fall before him.

14. And while they were yet talking with him, came the king's chamberlains, and hasted to bring Haman unto the banquet that Esther had prepared.

THE REQUEST OF ESTHER.

"NOW it came to pass on the third day,"—that is, on the third day of the fast. Always observe the significance which is attached to the "third day" in the Bible. The phrase occurs again and again, and is always associated with some event of peculiar interest or solemnity. High above all other incidents of this kind stands the resurrection of our Lord from the dead which occurred on the third day. The Lord works to-day and to-morrow, and on the third day he sets the crown of perfection upon his labour. We cannot hasten the coming of the third day; our whole business is with a good use of the two preceding days. Granted that they are used conscientiously and devoutly, and the third day may be regarded as an assured harvest of honour and gladness.

The fasting referred to was of a distinctively religious kind. There was no element of mere health or bodily discipline in it; the purpose was to chasten the soul before God, and to invest the spirit with a sense of helplessness and submission, so that it might come before heaven in earnest and importunate prayer with every hope of prevalence. If one may so say, the fasting was not only personal but co-operative; the command of Esther being:

"Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise" (iv. 16).

Here is fasting by consent of parties. Those who were outside the palace were required to fast as if instead of, or along with, Esther, so as to make her own fasting a still deeper and more significant abstinence from food. The phrase is altogether peculiar,—"Fast ye for me." Not that Esther was to be exempt from fasting herself, but that the fasting of others was to enlarge her own religious ceremony. Thus men help one another: we

pray for one another; we are thus transfused into one another; and so the spirit of selfishness is driven out of us, and we are filled with godly and noble concern for others, that they may be sanctified in all thought, passion, and service. Sooner or later we thus come to the religious line which underlies everything in human life. For many a day we have not a religious thought; we suppose we can manage our own concerns, and that shrewdness is the only religion we require; but life gathers itself up into agonies, crises, and moments of infinite peril, and only when we come to such points in life do we really feel our need of religious inspiration and spiritual sustenance; all externals are torn away, all secondary props are thrown down, all trust to self-inventiveness is discarded, and the soul stands as it were naked before God, pleading with him for mercy and for deliverance in time of need. Not until men are brought to this condition ought they to say anything about religion. Apart from all such experience their conversation can only be controversial, and indeed it may be but merely flippant. The man who has stood face to face with death, who has seen horror in its ghastliest form, who has had demands laid upon him as from the very tyrant of perdition; the man who has felt the intolerable burden of sin, the racking of an angry and tormenting conscience, is alone qualified to speak of the deep things which affect the religious aspirations and necessities of the soul. It is indeed a sacred experience, and may be a happy one, when we are driven beyond the usual lines of life, and are brought face to face with destiny, with eternity, with God. In such circumstances flippancy is blasphemy. We return from the interview blanched and withered, and bent down as if with a burden of years, but the soul is chastened and sweetened, and made more eager for divine fellowship. This is what we rejoice in as sanctified discipline or trial turned to its highest uses. Esther was in very deed in earnest; her soul burned; her spirit was aglow with one overmastering determination; she wrought with the energy of despair, and yet not altogether despair; for in the innermost recesses of the black cloud there were lines of light. The heart still hopes that God will appear even at the eleventh hour, and mightily deliver those who have thrown themselves upon him with all the resoluteness of trust and love.

Esther proved her earnestness by saying that she would "Go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish." This is heroism at its supreme point. Verily there are causes worth dying for. Many a Christian missionary has used the same expression in substance if not in terms. The Christian evangelist has felt that he must under all circumstances go forward to proclaim the gospel, to offer salvation, to magnify his Lord and Saviour; he has been told that if he go forward he will certainly be devoured; he has strengthened himself in God, and has said, I will go: if I perish, I perish. But who can perish if he go in the spirit of God, in the fear of God, and in the love of God? Will God disappoint such trust? Is it not his delight to come forth in a revelation of deliverance in the last extremity, and to magnify himself before his people? "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God." The history of personal religion often indeed deepens into the gloom of despair, yet suddenly it emerges from that black night, and glows like a dawn upon the delivered and inspired soul. Better die a noble death than live an ignoble life. What is there in us of what we may call philanthropic venture or enterprise? Who has ever undertaken any great and thrilling task for God or for man? Have we not been content with commonplace duties? Have we not fallen back in the hour of supreme testing? Every man must answer these questions for himself. Blessed is the soul that can recall times of consecration, that could not hesitate as to duty, and of courage that went forward when there seemed to be nothing before it but inevitable and overwhelming danger.

Esther ventured into "the inner court of the king's house, over against the king's house: and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house, over against the gate of the house." It was a critical moment. Humanly speaking, everything depended upon the mood of the king: if he were complacent all would be well, but if anything had ruffled his spirit, then indeed he would wreak his vengeance upon the nearest object. "When the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, she obtained favour in his sight." How eagerly she watched for the first token

of the king's feeling; how quick she would be in the interpretation of facial signs; how keen her ear in the detection of explanatory tones; happily, "The king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the sceptre." The king was in a right royal mood; he was indeed generous to excess, saying, with Oriental magniloquence, "What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom." All these were mere words, not meant to be taken in their grammatical import; yet they revealed the existence of a spirit or disposition upon which Esther might hopefully work. Esther answered, "If it seem good unto the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him." Esther did not hasten the delivery of her request. She hastened slowly. Her determination is to secure a favourable opportunity that she may place her request before the king under the best circumstances. It is not only enough to have a good cause, we must watch for the right time for promoting it. Many a philanthropic endeavour or noble enterprise may be thwarted because of the unseasonableness of its introduction. It is hardly too much to regard the offer of the king as in a sense typical of the offer of God to all earnest souls. Here there is nothing of the nature of hyperbole—"God is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think:" "Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it." Let us come boldly to the throne of grace,—as men who have great petitions to breathe in the hearing of a great king: the greater the king the greater the prayer that may be addressed to him: when God is the King who is approached, who can ask too much, provided it be asked with humility, submissiveness, and a grateful spirit? "Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." The first banquet was thus held under favourable circumstances. The king said, "Cause Haman to make haste, that he may do as Esther hath said. So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared." We may be going to our death by way of the banqueting-table. Truly, "Things are not what they seem."

The festival may be the feast of death. The figure sitting nearest to us when the wine giveth its colour in the cup may be a concealed image of ruin. "At the banquet of wine,"—that is, at the dessert, to use a modern expression—the king said unto Esther, "What is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed." Still Esther was in no undue haste. She was not quite sure that the ground under her feet was solid. In the cautiousness of her movement there was a religious restraint. How deeply she is pondering the king's face all the while: she knows that if she has miscalculated her opportunity by one moment she will unquestionably perish. She is handling two-edged instruments, and she may at any instant inflict upon herself deadly injury. Let us learn from the caution of Esther. In many cases we might have made more progress if we had been less energetic. There is a time for waiting, for silence, for standing still, in the discipline of this mysterious human life. She went no further meanwhile than to propose a second banquet—

"If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition, and to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them, and I will do to-morrow as the king hath said" (v. 8).

This charioteer must keep her team well in hand. God may visit her in the night visions, and show her somewhat of her purpose: who can tell whether God will not also visit the king in the night season and commune with him from heaven?

The one man who was pleased with the arrangements which were proposed was Haman—"Then went Haman forth that day joyful and with a glad heart." Everything was now bright before him; not a cloud hung upon the horizon; not a moan of wind could be heard in the tranquil air. Haman had simply to walk along a path of roses to a throne of gold. Everything seemed to be delivered over to his hand. He was as one standing in the harvest-field, who had only to thrust in his sickle that he might carry away sheaves of joy. It was indeed a thrilling moment in the experience of Haman. Surely it is something to have the whole world given into one's arms, to wear it as a jewel, play with it as a toy, use it as an investment, sit upon it as a

throne, and in short do what one pleases with so huge a treasure. This was the spirit in which Haman went forth that day. Yet even in this history there occurs the suggestive word "but"; so we read:

"But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he stood not up, nor moved for him, he was full of indignation against Mordecai" (v. 9).

Probably Mordecai was himself wrong in this instance; he might have stood up, or in some way he might have moved, in recognition of one so officially great. There is no need to excuse rudeness on the part of any man. Mordecai was probably rude, and by so much is to be condemned. Who could have thought that so slight an incident would have troubled so vast an enjoyment? Yet it did so. We have all had experience of this same emotion in human life. Little things that are awkward spoil great things that are pleasant. "Haman refrained himself," for after all the advantages preponderated over the disadvantages, and arrangements had been made for bringing vengeance upon the head of Mordecai and his people. To this height of magnanimity did Haman rise! Then came Haman's interview with his wife.

"Haman . . . called for his friends, and Zeresh his wife. And Haman told them of the glory of his riches, and the multitude of his children, and all the things wherein the king had promoted him, and how he had advanced him above the princes and servants of the king. Haman said moreover, Yea, Esther the queen did let no man come in with the king unto the banquet that she had prepared but myself; and to-morrow am I invited unto her also with the king" (vi. 10–12).

This is the speech of a selfish man. Everything turns upon what had been done to himself, and upon what he proposed himself to do. At this moment Haman may be regarded as the very incarnation of selfishness. Let us look steadily at the picture, and see whether we should like to exchange places with this man. The temptation would indeed be great were the offer made to us; at the same time it may be possible to see far enough into this hateful selfishness to make us hesitate whether we should accept his position were the opportunity convenient. Haman's subjects were all little ones—"the glory of his riches—the multitude of his children, the things wherein the king had promoted him, and how he had advanced him above the princes

and servants of the king;" not a single great thought, not one dream of human love, not one purpose of human deliverance; the man counts his wealth like a miser; numbers his jewels one by one, takes each up, looks at it in the light of the sun, and sets it down again with a murmur of self-gratulation. It was a poor mean life. Haman the miser is Haman the misanthropist. A man who can thus content himself with external treasures and passing honours is perfectly qualified to drive away from his path every enemy, even though he be called upon to commit murder itself. Nothing will stand in the way of the selfish man when his will is once set upon the accomplishment of a base purpose. Even at this point Mordecai was a shadow upon Haman's glory.

"Yet all this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate" (v. 13).

Now the disadvantages preponderated over the advantages. A living enemy may one day become an almighty foe. Mordecai is powerless enough to-day, but so long as his root is in the earth there is a possibility that he may grow and become strong. Something therefore must be done to rid the earth of this plague. Zeresh came to the rescue, saying:

"Let a gallows be made of fifty cubits high, and to-morrow speak thou unto the king that Mordecai may be hanged thereon: then go thou in merrily with the king unto the banquet" (v. 14).

"Use thy high privileges for the sake of getting rid of thine enemies, and walk over the body of a dead foe like a hero who has conquered, and go into the feast and make thyself glad with wine." The idea was pleasant to Haman; having an abundance of resources, he commanded the gallows to be made instantly. Is there not a gnawing worm in the heart of every joy? Is there not a Mordecai in the way of every ambitious man? We cannot have all things exactly our own way; there is one nail we cannot extract, one lock we cannot undo, one gate we cannot open, one claim we cannot pacify. In every path there would seem to be a deep gaping grave which even mountains cannot fill up; we throw great hills into that grave, and behold the hills sink in the abyss, and the grave remains wide open still. How near are some men to perfect bliss! If but one thorn could be extracted,

then the men themselves would be safe in heaven; but that one thorn abides to remind them of their limitations, and to sting them with a useful sense of disappointment. But there is another woman now engaged in the drama. Esther is working at one end, and Zeresh is working at the other. Yet the battle of life is not conducted by human agents only: all hearts are in the hands of God, and all events are elements which he works into the web of his providence. Where the duel is between two human creatures, its issue might be death; but there is no clash of arms, no moral conflict, in which God himself does not take part. We must wait, therefore, to see how events come to explain the mystery of processes.

Now we come to what may be termed a mysterious spiritual action. We read of that action in the sixth chapter, which thus opens:

"On that night could not the king sleep, and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king."

Why could not the king sleep? Why did the king's sleep flee away? We may attempt to trace this to physical causes, and satisfy ourselves with secondary explanations: the religious mind is not content with such suggestions: the spiritual man has no difficulty whatever in recognising the action of God in all the events of life, even in so trivial an instance as the sleeplessness of the king. Did not the king sleep well the night before? For many a night indeed he may have been sleeping well, but we now come to a point of time,—"that night,"—that particular, special, memorable night,—that night sleep seemed to have fled from the earth, and the darkness was turned into the light of day. Is God working? Is some great visit about to be paid to a human mind? These are questions which bring with them mystery, whether we look upon them from a physical or from a spiritual point of view. The exceptional circumstances of life should always be regarded as having a possibly religious significance. To speak of them as if they were but part of a great commonplace is to degrade them, and to lose all the advantage which might accrue from a right recognition of their import. That night! We have already had occasion to remark upon the wonders which God accomplishes in the night-time. God

could come by day; he could come in the early morning; he could hold the sun in the heavens until he had fought out the battle with man; but it pleases him to come forth under the cover of the clouds, and to walk as if stealthily in the silence of night, that he may commune with men with the greatest advantage. The king "could not" sleep. The words "could not" occur rather significantly in such a connection as this. Remember the power of the king; the man who could not sleep was "Ahasuerus which reigned from India even unto Ethiopia, over an hundred and seven and twenty provinces." Yet this Ahasuerus could not sleep! This is the man who "made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him: when he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty many days, even an hundred and fourscore days." Yet this man, with all his might and pomp, could not sleep, could not charm his eyelids to slumber, could not lull his brain into tranquillity. There is a "could not" in the history of all human power. Truly the king might have slept, for he lived in Shushan the palace; "the beds were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black, marble;" yet even in such beds no sleep was to be found. How was this? Everything that could be done to give the king rest was easily within command, and yet on this memorable night the spirit of sleep could not be wooed. Surely there is something of mystery in all human life. The kings of Persia were in most cases unable to read, and therefore readers were employed to read before the king. The records opened at a curious place. Why did they not open a page before, or a page later, if we may speak in modern phrase? or why did not the eye alight upon another scroll, instead of this particular writing? Strange indeed that those who read the records turned to the place where

> "It was found written, that Mordecai had told of Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's chamberlains, the keepers of the door, who sought to lay hand on the king Ahasuerus" (vi. 2).

Thus there is a resurrection of good works. Things are done and forgotten, and men never suppose that they will come up again; yet after many days they are vivified, and history begins

to take up the thread where it was dropped. The plot of the chamberlains "was known to Mordecai, who told it unto Esther the queen; and Esther certified the king thereof in Mordecai's name. And when inquisition was made of the matter, it was found out; therefore they were both hanged on a tree: and it was written in the book of the chronicles before the king." Now the king's conscience was touched, or his sense of justice; so said he, "What honour and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this?" The result showed that nothing had been done for him. The king was determined to rectify this matter, for he thought that by the pacification of conscience sleep might return. When Mordecai was honoured, Ahasuerus might fall into slumber. Many men are willing to purchase sleep on high terms. Could the murder but be undone; could the evil deed be but blotted out; could the stolen money be but safely returned; could the cruel word but be recalled; in short, could anything be done that sleep might once more come to the house, and fold all memories and anxieties within its healing robes! It happened that Haman was at hand at that very moment.

"Haman was come into the outward court of the king's house, to speak unto the king to hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him."

Thus there are two men as well as two women engaged in this plot—the king and Esther, Haman and Zeresh. At that particular moment they were all thinking about Mordecai. The king was about to honour him, and Haman was about to murder him. What a problem is our life! What strange forces contend over the body of every man! The contention as between the angel and the demoniac spirit over the body of Moses is no mere image, or if an image it expresses the tragical reality. God would save us, the devil would destroy us; angels are our ministering servants, yet we have to fight against principalities, powers, and rulers of darkness: all life is a tremendous controversy, and the question often arises, On which side will the issue turn?

Now we shall discover what a man would do for himself were a suitable opportunity created for the indication of his desires. The king said unto Haman, "What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour?" What could Haman imagine but that he himself was the object of the king's com-

placency? Yet Haman could answer the question without appearing to associate it with his own fortunes. He could be magnificently generous, and yet be all the while offering incense to his own vanity without appearing to be doing so. Had the king said, "What shall I do unto thee, O Haman?" so modest a person as Haman might have been troubled by the inquiry; but seeing that the inquiry is anonymous Haman is enabled to speak out of his own inflamed imagination:

"And Haman answered the king, For the man whom the king delighteth to honour, let the royal apparel be brought which the king useth to wear, and the horse that the king rideth upon, and the crown royal which is set upon his head: and let this apparel and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that they may array the man withal whom the king delighteth to honour, and bring him on horseback through the street of the city, and proclaim before him, Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honour" (vi. 7–9).

That is all that Haman would have done! He meant himself to be the hero of the hour, and this was the little and modest programme which he drew up! He must have been speaking generously for a rival or a friend, for surely there could be no taint of selfishness in so large a scheme! Fix upon Haman's answer as showing what man would do for himself if he could. We may study ourselves by studying others. Every human heart should be a looking-glass in which we see ourselves. Haman's answer did not displease the king; on the contrary, the king was ready to fall in with the generous suggestion. But did ever thunderbolt fall more suddenly from heaven than fell this answer upon the ears of Haman?

"Then the king said to Haman, Make haste, and take the apparel and the horse, as thou hast said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew, that sitteth at the king's gate: let nothing fail of all that thou hast spoken" (vi. 10).

Is not life a series of surprises? Is not the moment of highest ambition often next the moment of saddest humiliation? "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." Haman had been lifted up to heaven by his own vanity: how awful to drop then into the abyss of shame! But the word of Ahasuerus did not admit of contention. Eastern kings were not accustomed to be argued with: they knew nothing of the eloquence of remonstrance. It was as much as Haman's head was worth to offer one single word of opposition to the will of the king.

"Then took Haman the apparel and the horse, and arrayed Mordecai, and brought him on horseback through the street of the city, and proclaimed before him, Thus shall it be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour" (vi. 11).

Truly it would be curious to analyse Haman's feelings at this moment! Could he believe that what he was doing was a reality: was it not rather a hideous nightmare to be shaken off by some violent effort? Had Haman been doing all this unconsciously, leading up almost to the coronation of the man whom he hated most? Again and again we see that we cannot tell what we are doing. Haman went home a sad-hearted man, and "told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had befallen him." How he stumbled in the story, how he cried and whimpered, how his face interpreted his tones, and his whole attitude indicated his shame! The people understood the whole perfectly; they said:

"If Mordecai be of the seed of the Jews, before whom thou hast begun to fall, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely fall before him. And while they were yet talking with him, came the king's chamberlains, and hasted to bring Haman unto the banquet that Esther had prepared" (vi. 13, 14).

A banquet without a blessing, a feast without satisfaction, glaring pomp and circumstances that mocked the eyes that had looked upon their own humiliation. These are the ironies of life, which plague and perplex the heart and vex the imagination. Haman would rather have been in the wilderness, crying aloud in solitude to relieve himself of pain of heart. It is cruel to be forced to go to a feast when the heart is in a mood of sadness. "He that seeketh his life shall lose it." Let all ambitious men read the story of Haman, and take warning. His story may not be repeated in its Oriental details, all the flash and colour may be wanting; yet, even when they have vanished, there remains enough in the tale to remind us that we too are ambitious, that we too may have ignoble thoughts towards our fellow-men, and that even we are not above resorting to the foulest practices to get rid of the Mordecai who stands in our way as a stumbling-block. Will it be regarded as commonplace or as trite, if here we venture once more to say, Beware of jealousy: it is cruel as the grave; it poisons every feast, it turns every goblet of wine into a fountain of poison: check it at its very beginning; better die to live than live to die.

Chapter vii. 6.

"The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman."

THE INDEX FINGER.

IN the third chapter we saw that Ahasuerus fell into Haman's hand in the matter of killing the Jews:

"And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them. If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the hands of those that have the charge of the business, to bring it into the king's treasuries. And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy" (iii. 8–10).

No name was mentioned, so far as the record enables us to judge. The question, therefore, of Ahasuerus—"Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so?"—was neither an expression of affectation nor of ignorance. Ahasuerus thought that Haman could do no harm, no wrong; so hearing a request from his chief officer he took off his ring and said: Operate according to thy desire; carry out thy policy, and pay the money. This being done, "the king and Haman sat down to drink." No good can come of that. Into what history soever that line enters, we shall find mischief sooner or later. What happened afterwards we have already seen. Ahasuerus, Esther, and Haman are now at the second banquet; the queen is asked once more for her petition and her request:

"Then Esther the queen answered and said, If I have found favour in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request: for we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish" (vv. 3, 4).

This is the speech she would have made a day or two ago, but could not; the king's face did not read favourably. Ahasuerus

had indeed challenged Esther to make her petition and her request known unto him, but she read every wrinkle in his face, pondered every tone of his voice, and as we have said she made haste slowly. Now the second banquet is being held, and this pathetic request has been urged, and the king demands the name of the man who has plotted this destruction; and Esther, looking that look of earnestness which never can be mistaken, fixed her eyes upon her enemy, and, mayhap lifting the index finger, said, "The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman." There are moments when we must speak. We speak best in such moments when we do not know what we are going to say:—"It shall be given you in that same hour what ye ought to speak." We know the substance of it, but the accent is given at the moment; the tone is Pentecostal, the accent is sharpened with the sadness of inspiration.

The best way of dealing with every enemy is to avoid generalities; beware of the sophism associated with vague sentiments. Definite statements are manageable, but vague charges are never to be entertained. He is always a false accuser who makes a general charge; he is a learned false witness, skilled and cunning, who says he will not go into the case: he will say nothing about it: he thinks it better to hold his tongue. Would God his tongue had been cut out before he said that! He has said more by not saying than he could have said if he had told the truth. The supreme, vital, ever-useful lesson of this incident is that we are to lift the index finger, point to the adversary and the enemy, and name him. When we learn this lesson we shall make progress in many upward and beneficent directions. No man makes progress who deals in generalities. The sermon is in the application. The prayer is in the Amen. The Amen is not a final word in any rhetorical sense; it is the word that takes up into itself all preceding words, and repeats them with the conciseness which heaven cannot mistake.

Let us apply this teaching in one or two directions:—For example, in the matter of our own personal character. We should accuse ourselves frankly. A man should be upon such good terms with himself as always to tell himself the truth.

How can this be done? May not a man say: I am in a world of sin and sorrow, and am tainted by the general atmosphere, and it is most difficult to thread one's way through principalities and powers and the rulers of the darkness of this world? No. We have had enough of that pointless sentiment. You ask, May not a man describe himself as a poor wandering sheep in wolf-land? The answer is, No. You must be just to your own character and destiny. Put your finger upon the weak point of your character, and say, The adversary and enemy is this wicked —Self-indulgence. Sometimes you go a long way towards abashing an enemy by naming him: he sees that you are coming into close quarters with him, and he feels how small is his strength, and sometimes he falls backward to the ground. Tell yourself that you are allowing your life to ooze away through self-gratification. You never say No to an appetite; you never smite a desire in the face. Do not talk about the general ill-condition of the world, the infirmities of human nature, but lift the finger, look the enemy in the face, and say, Thy name is Self-indulgence; the wine is killing me; the gratification of illicit desire is sapping the foundations of my life, taking the life which issues out of my brain, making a fool of me: I must speak the truth and name the enemy. Others can see it; other men know when you are telling lies by delivering yourselves of generalities; they see the brute coming up through the face that was meant to be divine; every time they meet you they say, The enemy has written his signature once more upon that countenance; the man's voice is not what it was wont to be; he does not look so steadily: how his eye wanders, how his cheek flushes, how his lips have lost their firmness and expressiveness, and how altogether he is going down in a lurch that signifies weakness wrought by concupiscence and evil! You will never be cured until you name the disease.

Look at the subject in another direction:—The adversary and enemy is this hateful Jealousy. Jealousy does not like to be named. Jealousy is sensitive, a most delicate refined creature, that cannot bear the cold wind or the indication of some accusing and reproachful finger. Jealousy! who ever knew it? Whoever has known it can never forget it. Jealousy spoils every-

thing: it throws a black mantle over the white dawn, and turns the noonday to dark night, and the summer it clothes with sackcloth. Though it had all gold and silver and honour, yet so long as there was one poor Mordecai in the way all would go for nothing. Does the helm turn the ship? Does a little thing move the vessel of life? So jealousy may move the whole nature in wrong directions, away from havens that invite it to repose and luxury and security. Your disease, you say to yourself, is jealousy. Speak in this fashion: when you have entered your closet, and shut the door, say, I am a jealous man, and therefore I am an unjust man; I cannot bear that that man should be advancing; I hate him; the recollection of his name interferes with my prayers; would God I could lay hold of something I could publish against him! I would run him to death: yes, this is the reality of the case: Almighty God, cast out this devil, this all-devil; only thou canst exorcise this Legion. Now there is hope of you; you have named the enemy. But you have been going about, saying, I am sure I feel no jealousy: why should I? what is there to be jealous about? after all, who is he? the thing is positively ludicrous to me, that I should be charged with jealousy. Thus men tell lies to themselves, and therefore they never can be cured.

Or take it in some other aspect, and say:—The adversary and enemy is this eternal Worldliness that will not let me get near my God: I know it; I sing hymns audibly, and make bargains inaudibly at the same time; I take my whole business to church, I audit my books at the altar; when some poor earnest or fanatical man asks me to bow my head in prayer, I close my eyes that I may see my business affairs the more distinctly: I will speak to myself about this; I will say, Thou art a worldly man—that is, a world-living man; thou art satisfied with dust, with time, with sense, with things that can be held in the hand; thou canst not pray, there are bags of gold upon thy dumb lips, and through them thou canst not breathe a supplication to heaven: God pity me! for the world has hold of my right hand and of my left hand, and when I look abroad it is to see what I can next seize, how I can more perfectly satisfy my avidity. Now you have begun to mend—"To know oneself diseased is half the

cure"—there is hope of thee now, O patient; but in talking generalities and vague sentiments, in looking impiously pious, thou wast telling lies to thyself, and hurting God. Every man carries the enemy within himself. A man can have but one real enemy. Look the enemy in the face; call him your enemy; name him. He thinks you do not know him; he conceals himself by many skilfully-arranged disguises and hears you speak of general infirmity, and then he strikes you again; but if you will lay hands upon him, and look at him with eyes of fire, and name him with the eloquence of earnestness, you will at least have begun the right conditions of battle; God be with the truth! This would put an end to a good deal of pastoral intercourse. Pastors have to listen to many lies softly spoken. They could name the adversary and the enemy, but they shrink from doing so, and call that shrinking delicacy.

What say you to this case? A man is dying of a fatal disease, and he knows it; the disease is internal, his life is ebbing out of him; and yet he says, I hear as well as ever, I see distinctly, I have not lost a single limb. Why this irony of enumerating supposed points of strength when the life itself is succumbing to a fatal assault? Would it not be wiser on the part of the man to say, Do not tell me wherein I am apparently complete and strong; direct attention to the disease that is killing me, and if you can do anything towards the mitigation or cure of that disease, for pity's sake, and in pity's name, do it; but do not talk to me about symptoms that are apparently favourable: as a dying man, I ask you to save me from death! That is earnestness; that is religiousness. Now are we faithful to ourselves, or do we shrink from self-reproach? Do we take refuge in generalities? If so we can make no progress, and our pastors' solicitude and teachers' eloquence go for nothing because of our own self-neglect.

The same point of view may be occupied with regard to public accusations. Take it in the matter of national decay. Where is there a minister who will have courage enough to say, The adversary and enemy is this wicked ———, and then name the most popular sin of the day? We love to hear the minister speaking generalities, and if we can assign those generalities

in any degree to the person sitting immediately behind us we are proportionately gratified; but directness we never paid for. No man subscribes to a ministry that is direct and personal. Many ministries have been ruined because they would not trifle with the hearers, but would when occasion needed come straight down upon the richest, strongest man in the congregation, and say, Thy name is Iscariot! That was pointed, personal, and the poor soul, fool of fools, he went away and came no more. No man ever pays a pew-rent for the purpose of having the truth spoken to him, though he is willing to subscribe that insignificant trifle to hear generalities which he can dissolve in air. So mysterious is the religious sentiment! So incalculable is religious charity! Who in looking abroad upon the country will say, The adversary and enemy is this wicked liquor traffic? He would lose hearers; but he would be a stronger man for getting that burden off his conscience. What is the use of ministers and Sunday-school teachers, tract distributers and Christian visitors, going up and down doing their work whilst the infernal drink traffic is slaying, damning the land? Where is there a teacher who dares stand up and say, The adversary and enemy is this wicked official self-seeking? He would be accounted rude. Critics would say, There is about him a kind of brusqueness that may perhaps offend some, and to some extent may lessen his influence or cripple his usefulness. No! the Christ of God was a plain-speaking man; he said: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees! whited sepulchres!" What wonder that he had not where to lay his head!

Or we may apply the same law to the decline of spiritual power. It is an easy and delightful thing to read a paper upon this subject—namely, the decline of spiritual power—but who names the Haman? Who comes down upon the villain with a constable's clutch? What keeps us back?—Fear of offending the world. The world ought to be offended. No worldling should ever have one moment's comfort in the house of God. He should feel that unless he is prepared to change his disposition, he is altogether in the wrong place. He has come to cool himself in a furnace; he has perpetrated the most obvious irony that can possibly occur in all human conduct—a worldly man who wants to love the world has gone to church! It is simply impossible.

As a matter of fact, he has gone. We deny it; he is seated within the four walls which are, for convenience' sake, entitled the church. But the worldly man was never at church in his life; if he was, he came out a scorched man, hot all over, hating the minister and detesting the whole place,—unless, indeed, he went, saying, I feel that I am worldly, and I want to be converted; I am listening for words that will help me to begin, under God, a blessed life,—then he was at church, and then he went away thanking God that he had seen heaven opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God with gifts for men.

Then sometimes the adversary and enemy is this wicked Doubt in the heart of the preacher himself. The man is divided. His axe is split across the very edge. There is no power in his right arm. When he speaks he keeps back the emphasis. He knows it, feels it, but he cannot live perhaps without his pulpit. It works like madness in the brain! Why do not men speak just what they think and believe: what they can see with their inner vision and feel with all the sensitiveness of a renewed nature? If we are appointed to preach speculatively, what wonder if we get up in the clouds, and are left there by all common-sense men? Any man so fond of the clouds as to live amongst them ought to be left there. By all means let him enjoy that airy blessedness! But the journalists, the preachers, the schoolmasters, the parents, who have anything to speak to the sphere within which they operate ought to speak with distinctiveness, simplicity, sympathy, kindness, hopefulness, burning earnestness, and let other things of a speculative turn or quality come to show themselves as life unfolds and becomes ennobled.

We might apply the same doctrine to hindrances in the Church:—The adversary and enemy is this wicked cold-hearted man. Whenever he comes into the church the preacher cannot preach: he cannot do many mighty works because that man is there—cold, icy, unresponsive, critical. He will make his minister an offender for a word,—a man who is the victim of grammar, and who never felt the intoxication of a supreme enthusiasm. Nearly every church is wrecked by one man—the cold, ghastly, sepulchral, bony man! Is there no means of

getting rid of him? We have seen many a noble young soul quenched, and taking refuge in its little piece of paper called a sermon the moment the man described has come in. We must name him, and those who are in more independent positions than others, if there are such, ought to name him first and to insist upon his being taken out. A thousand men must not have their spiritual education risked by the presence of any one man, though he drive to the church in a chariot of gold and there be six white steeds in its silver-clasped shafts. That man must go! his patronage is a burden, his presence a perpetual difficulty. Name the adversary and the enemy. Do not palter with the occasion. Life is brief, and there is only time to be true. Earnestness will save such definiteness from the vulgarity and folly of rudeness. Be earnest and you will be dignified. Nathan lost nothing of dignity when, looking at the king, he said, "Thou art the man." Paul lost nothing of majesty when, looking at Agrippa, he said, "King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest." Nor did Paul lose anything of moral sublimity when he stood before Felix and "reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come," until the two hearers whitened and quailed. We are not to work in a spirit of mere criticism or fault-finding in our accusations of men and of the age; if we do we shall soon degenerate into exasperation or defiance: we are to accuse with dignity, and to vindicate our charge by the cogency and abundance of our proofs. The Christian Church as a church is to be a witness against every form of evil. We are afraid to name the adversary in church, we confine ourselves to "proper" words, to "decent" expressions, to euphemisms that have neither beginning nor ending as to practical vitality and force. We are the victims of circumlocution; we go round and round the object of our attack, and never strike it in the face. What we want is a definite, tremendous, final stroke. Esther succeeded. Her spirit can never fail.

Chapters vii.-x.

REPRISALS.

WE have seen Esther in the attitude of lifting the index finger; we have now to consider the attitude of Haman whilst that finger was being pointed at him. The statement is marked by great simplicity, but also by solemn suggestiveness,—

"Then Haman was afraid before the king and the queen" (vii. 6).

Why was he afraid? Nothing had been stated but simple fact: is it possible that a man can be terrified by being reminded of simple reality? We may go farther in this case, and by going farther may increase our wonder. Could not Haman defend himself? Was it not open to him to say to king Ahasuerus, That is certainly true, but nothing has been done without the king's consent, and no writing has been sent forth that was not sealed with the royal signet: what the queen has said is perfectly true, but I must hide myself behind the king's authority? Not a word did he say: he simply burned with shame; his cheeks were red with fire. How is this? The answer is plain enough. We do many things with the king's signet which we have no business to do. We may be very careful about our little cordon of facts, but all this amounts to nothing so long as the heart accuses itself. No matter what writings you have,—it is of no consequence that you point to conversations, and recall incidents, and remind your interlocutor of certain occurrences, if the thing itself is wrong. There is something in human nature that gives way at the weakest point. There are defences that are in reality accusations. To excuse is in very deed to accuse under such circumstances. Men know this, and yet play the contrary part with great skill and persistence; they say they have documentary evidence, but they do not tell us how they procured it; they can produce letters sealed and signed by high authority, but they never tell the wicked process through which these letters came to be facts. Men, therefore, soon give way under the pressure of incomplete evidence; the unwritten law swallows up all the inky documents. Haman had indeed gone to the king, and told him about a certain people, diverse from the people of Media and Persia, and had in

very truth received the king's orders to write letters of destruction; but when all came to all it was the unwritten law that made a coward of Haman. The letters ought not to have been written; being written, they simply amounted to so much evidence against the man; the very motive of the letter burned the letter, and thus made it non-existent; and we are perfectly well aware that we are doing many things, in statesmanship, in ecclesiastical relations, in personal references, that bear very distinctly upon this method of procedure. There are laws, there are facts, there are letters; but all these ought not to have been; they are not in accord with the eternal unwritten law of righteousness, truth, charity, pureness, godliness, and therefore when that is pointed out all the documents fall into the fire, crinkle, blacken, catch the flame, and evaporate in smoke. Thus was Haman afraid before the king and the queen. Cowardice is traceable to consciousness of wrong-doing. Haman said to himself, I got the letters, but I ought not to have got them; I could take off this ring and show it to his majesty, but the ring would take fire and burn me if I held it up under such circumstances; no, I am a murderer, and I am discovered.

What then took place?

"The king arising from the banquet of wine in his wrath went into the palace garden: and Haman stood up to make request for his life" (vii. 7).

That was all! Let me live! Strip me, cast me off, banish me, but—let the poor dog live! All mock royalties come to that, all false ambitions, all ill-conceived plans, all selfishness, all murder. Do not hang me! I care for this poor old neck; I will never speak more, I will only ask for bread and water; only let the dog live! He was a great man just now;

Haman "sent and called for his friends, and Zeresh his wife. And Haman told them of the glory of his riches, and the multitude of his children, and all the things wherein the king had promoted him, and how he had advanced him above the princes and servants of the king" (v. 10, 11).

Now he says, Let the dog live! Let the bad man take care! Judas Iscariot, be on thy guard! Heaven is against thee, and thine own hell hates thee. "There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked." You are very clever, you only are asked to the king's banquet, you are entrusted with the king's seal, you are chancellor, premier, leader,—"Let him that thinketh he standeth

take heed lest he fall." "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!" The success of bad men is their failure. There is no heaven in their gold; it is not gold, it is gilt. How rich the table is! but Haman cannot eat; the wine is old, but the palate is dead. Walk in the garden and view the lovely flowers: there is no loveliness to eyes of greed, to eyes of ambition, to eyes of selfishness, every Eden is lost by the disobedient man. Do not let me die even in Eden, give me a skin of beast to my back, and let me out of the golden gate—Let the dog live! There are many valiant men whose valour will one day be turned into pale cowardice. Only they are valiant who are right; only they are heroic who love God and keep his commandments; to them death is abolished, the grave a hole filled up with flowers, blossoming at the top. Who would be wicked—prosperously wicked, dining with the king, but wicked; drinking wine with the queen with a murderer's lips? We may be murderers without shedding blood. Every man who has broken a heart is a murderer, it matters not whether he be the highest prelate or supremest minister.

Whatever Ahasuerus did he did quickly. No one ever complained that he was dilatory. Let justice be done to Xerxes. He was a man of action. It was pointed out to him that the gallows fifty cubits high, which Haman had made for Mordecai, who had spoken good for the king, stood in the house of Haman. The moment Ahasuerus heard there was a gallows he said, Hang Haman. Circumstances happily coincide—here is the victim, here is the gallows: a child may complete the syllogism. It is wonderful how men who have no knowledge of the true God have always discovered a point of almightiness somewhere. Men who had no God, as we understand that term, have always had a deific line in their policy, a black line which meant the end. The Oriental kings realised this ideal of almightiness. Their word was law. Hang him! and no man dare say, Spare him! How could Haman complain? The gallows was his own invention; it was made after his own imagination; it was the very height he liked best for a gallows—not forty-nine cubits high, but the round fifty. How often he had hanged Mordecai on the preceding night! how he had seen the Jew dangle in the air, and almost seen birds of

carrion come and alight on his shoulder to look him over with a view to banqueting! How could he complain? This is God's law: "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." All this we ourselves must go through. Take care! How much deeper are you going to make that hole? Do you say you mean to make it about ten feet deeper? then be assured that you have ten feet farther to fall. Men dig holes for others, and fall into them themselves. Do not be grave-diggers. "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." Our hands were never made for the forging and hurling of thunderbolts; they were made to clasp other human hands, to lead the blind, to help the helpless. Yet who does not rejoice in this law of retribution, worked out on a grand scale, without a sign or token of pettishness in all its evolution? The universe would not be secure without it. The wicked man must be stopped somewhere: and how can a man be more decorously hung than on his own gallows? Is there satire in heaven? Is there just a faint wreathing of sarcasm on the lips of Justice? Do the powers supreme wait until the plans of bad men are quite completed, and then make them cut down the harvest which they themselves sowed in such glee of heart? Bad man, thine end is the gallows-tree! thou shalt surely be hanged by the neck until thou be dead. We see thee at thy front door, well painted, well polished, opening upon museum and picture-gallery and treasure-house; we hear the horses pawing and snorting in their warm stables, and see the servants flitting about in panoramic activity and confusion; we speak to thee over thy bags of gold—thou shalt be damned! Say ye to the wicked, It shall be ill with him: he shall vomit his own successes, and when he is most ashamed it will be when he most clearly sees his triumphs. Say ye to the righteous, It shall be well with thee: poor, desolate, and afflicted, carrying seven burdens when one is enough for thy poor strength; yet at the end, because thou hast loved thy Lord, it shall be well with thee. Do not attempt to explain God's "well." It is a better word than if it had been in the superlative degree. Grammatical increase would mean moral depletion. It is enough that God says, "Well done." "Well" is better than "best" in such setting of words.

From what point did Haman proceed to the gallows? From a banquet of wine. Oh to think of it!—from a banquet to the gallows! There is not such a distance between the two points as might at first appear. Nearly the worst things in all the world are banquets. How a man can live in a mansion-house and pray, is a problem which we can consider even if we cannot answer. It was the rich man in the parable who was called "fool." We should have been sorry for him under that designation if we had not first heard his speech; but after hearing his speech we found that no other word precisely covered the occasion. The house of mourning is better than the house of feasting. There is a sadness which is to be preferred to laughter. There are funerals infinitely more desirable than weddings. But we are the victims of the senses; we like gold and silver, and satin and colour; we rub our skilled fingers over them and say, Behold the texture! see the lustre! admire the beauty! We are blind within. An awful irony, that a man should have eyes to see stones and trees, and no eyes wherewith to see spirits, angels, God! Men drink away their vision; men drown in their cups the divinity that stirs within them.

Is the matter then at an end here? No. Haman's policy must be all reversed.

"On that day did the king Ahasuerus give the house of Haman the Jews' enemy unto Esther the queen" (viii. 1).

Esther had another request to make—"She fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears." Then it was all over! What did she beseech the king to do?

"To put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews. Then the king held out the golden sceptre toward Esther. So Esther arose and stood before the king. And said, If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes [Oh this eloquent tongue! She knew it was all settled before it began], let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews which are in all the king's provinces: for how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?" (viii. 3–6).

Pathos will do more than logic. Would God all preachers knew that one simple, practical, eternal lesson! Tears conquer. It was all done. Ahasuerus made gracious reply; the king's

scribes were called at the time to write letters of reversal all over the empire—

"To the lieutenants, and the deputies and rulers of the provinces which are from India unto Ethiopia, an hundred twenty and seven provinces, unto every province according to the writing thereof, and unto every people after their language, and to the Jews according to their writing, and according to their language" (viii. 9).

It was the beginning of a gospel: Go ye into the provinces, and tell every Jew that he shall live. It was a great speech. There is a greater still made by the Jew whom we call the Son of God, and worship as God the Son: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature," the gospel of pardon, acceptance, adoption, restoration, assured and immortal sonship.

Now will the Jews be merciful? Will they remember that

> "The quality of mercy is not strain'd;
> It droppeth as the gentle rain from heave
> Upon the place beneath"?

Will they be magnanimous? It is expecting much from them. They were not forgiving. No men, Jews or Gentiles, are to be trusted with absolute power.

"Thus the Jews smote all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, and slaughter, and destruction, and did what they would unto those that hated them" (ix. 5).

That is human, but not the less awful. Who can be so bad as man? What beast can be so cruel as an unnatural parent? We have no excuse to offer for these men. If we had been reading a story rather than a history we should have had a different conclusion; we should have made the Jews almost divine: but the Jews were human, and therefore resentful and unforgiving. There is but one Man who can forgive sins.

A wonderful book is this book of Esther! We are told that the name of God does not once occur in it. How fond people are of counting times in which names appear! Observe, it is the *name* of God that is not in it: God himself is in every line of it. This distinction should be carefully marked by all men who are verbal statisticians, who take note of how many times the name of Christ appears in a sermon. The name of Christ may never be mentioned, and yet Christ may be in the sermon

from end to end, the inspiration of its power, the secret of its pathos, the charm of its earnestness. It is but frivolous work to be counting the number of times in which the name of God occurs in this book or that, or the name of Christ occurs in this sermon or in that: is the Spirit Divine there? Is the thought from eternity or from time? Is it a mighty rushing sound from heaven, or is it but a whirlwind carrying nothing with it but thick dust? Men can answer the question well. There is a spirit in man, and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth him understanding If God be for us, who can be against us?

"Mordecai the Jew was next unto king Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethren, seeking the wealth of his people, and speaking peace to all his seed" (x. 3).

What narrow escapes we have in life! How near being hanged was even Mordecai one night! Who can tell what will happen to-morrow? Blessed is that servant who when his Lord cometh shall be found waiting. The faithful servant shall be called up into friendship and honour and coronation. You are in great straits to-day—to-morrow you may have great riches. "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." There is a sentimental hope which is never to be trusted; there is a hope which is the blossom of righteousness or the music of reason. Every Christian has the spirit of hope given to him as part of his divine estate: quench not the Spirit. We are not delivered in order that we may crush our enemies; we are not Christians in order that we may slay the heathen; we have not been adopted into God's family that we may go out with a naked sword to cut down every infidel, sceptic, atheist, and unbeliever: we are saved that we may save; we have this honour given to us that we may call others to the same great joy. Let us, if we are delivered men—let us, if we are saved from peril, strait, and sore extremity—let us show our gratitude by our benevolence.

So we part with the brilliant queen, in some respects the Lady Macbeth of her day. The oldest blood of history warmed her veins, and the light of generations of heroes shone in her glorious eyes. She was developed by circumstances. Now she is timid, calculating, half afraid, half ashamed: her courage comes and goes like the blood-tide on fair cheeks, and anon she is as an

unquenchable fire. How carefully she laid her finger on the king's pulse! How well she kept the neck of Haman within reach of her crushing heel! She saw wonders, too, in her dreams! Countless hosts of murdered Jews; women begging for pity, and so doubling the very agony they hoped to abate; children speared, and hurled into depths like refuse too vile to waste fire upon: then Mordecai, grey with grief, bowed down with sorrow's invisible burden, and sad with woe never to be all known;—his quivering old life now yielding to despair, and now rising to an impossible hope,—herself, killed, and buried amid oaths and jeers—and Haman, his breast a hell, rejoicing with infernal joy as the last Jew gasped and died. Then the dream changed: a king was approached, interested, mollified; a fair woman grasped a moral sceptre, addressed a heart-speech to a willing ear, transfixed with eloquent finger the prince of villains, and on a morning cool and bright the enemy who plotted the murder of others swung from a gallows fifty cubits high! Thus life hints itself in dreams. Thus in the night we see outlines invisible in the glare of day. Thus, and thus, and thus, the great Spirit comes to establish his infinite purpose. We do not strain the moral of the story by calling for an Esther to stand up in modest courage in the presence of devastating forces—drunkenness, lust, selfishness, oppression, slavery, and all wrong. The Woman must deliver us. She knows the availing method: her tongue is the instrument of eloquence; her eyes see the path that lies through all the darkness; she can mark the time, estimate the forces that are foremost, and strike violently without violence, and mightily without exaggeration. We want no dramatic attitude, no public display, no vaunting ostentation or self-assertion;—we want the might of light, the stratagem of love, the courage of faith, the word of deliverance. Are not women themselves beaten, starved, dishonoured? Are not children cast out, neglected, left to die? Are not lies triumphant, are not honour and truth thrown down in the streets? The true propriety is to be unselfishly sincere, high-minded, fearless,—O that women would take up the sad world's cause and live and die for Christ. When did Jesus discourage the ministry of women? When did he order them home with gruff disdain? Did he not need them all, and make them rich with his blessing?

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